

WILDERNESS AND MARGINALITY OF A CUBAN INTELLECTUAL IN PEDRO JUAN GUTIÉRREZ'S *TRILOGÍA SUCIA DE LA HABANA* (1998)

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how the novel *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* (1998), by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, depicts the decline of the subject identity heavily constructed by the paternalist ideology, promises and morals of the Cuban nation-state during the revolutionary period. Instead, emptiness, loss of faith, despair and wild survival became distressing effects of the nineties crisis. Pedro Juan's marginal existence, constrained agency and sense of lost time embodies a common place for many Cuban intellectuals, trapped in the absurdity of a chaotic national situation. With *Trilogía*, Gutiérrez re-imagines the Cuban nation at the turn of the century as a dystopian place of material decadence, dehumanization, revival of colonial stereotypes and a rough culture of daily survival by all means. In those circumstances, the present is the only time that really counts and the hypersexualizing of the body became the privilege space for individual agency. The novel moves the spotlight from the collective incarnation of the "New Man" in the official revolutionary propaganda, to the voice of forgotten individuals massively converted into marginal beings. This article dialogues with texts by scholars Odette Casamayor, Guillermina de Ferrari, José Quiroga y Esther Whitfield, and with theories by Pierre Bourdieu, Roberto Bolaño, Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall.

Keywords: Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Cuban narrative, post-socialist intellectual, decadence, marginality

RESUMEN

Este artículo argumenta que la novela *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* (1998), del escritor cubano Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, logra documentar el momento de declive masivo de la ideología paternalista, las promesas, la moral y los valores del sujeto y el estado-nación cubano del período "revolucionario". La novela recrea el vacío, la pérdida de fe, el desespero y el estado de sobrevivencia salvaje que vivieron los cubanos como resultado de los demoleedores efectos de la crisis económica de la década de los noventa en la isla. El estado de permanente existencia precaria, asfixia y pérdida del sentido del tiempo que experimenta Pedro Juan, el protagonista de la novela, es un reflejo del

lugar común que representó la crisis para muchos intelectuales cubanos en aquellos momentos, atrapados en el absurdo del caos nacional. Con *Trilogía*, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez “re-imagina” a la nación cubana de cambio de siglo como un lugar dis-tópico, de decadencia material, deshumanización, de regreso a estereotipos coloniales y a una cultura feroz de sobrevivencia diaria. En esas circunstancias, el presente y la hiper-sexualización del cuerpo se convirtieron en espacios “privilegiados” para ejercer algún tipo de agencia individual. La narrativa de la novela desplaza el énfasis alcanzado por la encarnación colectiva del “próspero” “Hombre Nuevo” en la propaganda revolucionaria oficialista hasta el momento, hacia la voz de individuos marginales y olvidados en los que se convirtieron muchos cubanos súbitamente como resultado de la crisis. Este artículo dialoga con textos de académicas como Odette Casamayor, Guillermina de Ferrari, José Quiroga y Esther Whitfield, y con teorías de Pierre Bourdieu, Roberto Bolaño, Frantz Fanón y Stuart Hall.

Palabras clave: Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, narrativa cubana, intelectual post-revolucionario, decadencia, marginalidad

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article postule que dans son roman *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* (1998), l'écrivain cubain Pedro Juan Gutiérrez rend compte du déclin que connurent l'idéologie paternaliste, les promesses, la morale et les valeurs personnelles, ainsi que l'état-nation cubain au cours de la période révolutionnaire. Le roman recrée le sentiment de vacuité, la désillusion, le désespoir et l'état de survie sauvage dont les Cubains firent l'expérience suite aux effets dévastateurs de la crise économique des années 90 sur l'île. Le sentiment d'une existence profondément précaire, d'asphyxie et de perte de repères temporels dont fait l'expérience Pedro Juan, le personnage principal du roman, reflète un lieu commun sur ce que la crise représenta pour de nombreux intellectuels cubains de l'époque, englués dans l'absurdité du chaos national. Avec sa trilogie, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez reconfigure la nation cubaine et la transplante dans un lieu « dystopique », mais aussi dans un autre siècle, de décadence matérielle et de déshumanisation, en proie, une nouvelle fois, aux clichés coloniaux et à une culture féroce de survie quotidienne. Dans une telle atmosphère, le présent et l'hypersexualisation du corps deviennent des espaces privilégiés pour que les Cubains puissent s'exprimer librement. La narration du roman déplace l'accent mis, initialement, sur le modèle collectif de l'« homme nouveau » (« Hombre Nuevo »), prospère, selon la propagande révolutionnaire officielle, pour laisser entendre la voix des marginaux et des laissés-pour-compte, tous ces gens que de nombreux Cubains étaient devenus du jour au lendemain après la crise. Cet article s'inscrit dans la mouvance des travaux d'Odette Casamayor, de Guillermina de Ferrari, José Quiroga

et Esther Whitfield, et reprend les théories de Bourdieu, Bolaños, Fanon et Stuart Hall.

Mots-clés : Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, narration cubaine, intellectuel post-révolution, décadence, marginalité

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The disenchantment of the revolutionary intellectual

The loss of the Soviet aid after the fall of the Berlin Wall since 1989 virtually paralyzed the Cuban economy and led to a massive migration. The island experienced the most severe post-revolution crisis, with significant effects on the sustainability and legitimacy of the socialist “paradigm” still smoldering today: shortages of basic products, proliferation of preventable illnesses, increased poverty and marginalization, a significant drop in employment opportunities, and a bigger presence of criminality and corruption after the dollarization of the economy. In those dramatic circumstances, the Cuban government adopted a strategy of survival known as *El Período Especial* (The Special Period) to perpetuate itself in power by all possible means. The desperate search for foreign currency led the government to focus on developing of the tourism industry and to open up some cultural sectors to the market.

As a result of the crisis, there was a certain tolerance by the cultural establishment towards some critical writers like Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. Eventually several of his works have been published on the island. He has managed to live on the island and sustain himself by his transnational endeavors. This was a distinctive form of transnationalism in the post '59 Cuban cultural scene—which until the nineties was hardly an option for artists living on the island.

Publishing was severely affected since it could no longer rely on state subsidies. Hence, the government adopted some regulations that yielded certain control to writers over hard currency benefits derived from their intellectual property rights and contract negotiations (Whitfield *Cuban Currency* 79). The crisis also affected the role of the writer as a revolutionary intellectual who, under the altruistic pressures of the “New Man” rhetoric, “defined its Cuban citizenship in terms of his/her willingness to sacrifice their body for the nation” (De Ferrari *Community* 11). According to De Ferrari, until the nineties the conditions for agency of the socialist revolutionary intellectual were reduced to the enjoyment of certain aesthetic freedoms, while staying away from social and political problems (12). This was also associated with an often-conservative stance of writers and especially critics attributed to their fear of government

censorship (De Ferrari *Community* 14). For De Ferrari, the privileging of the aesthetic realm in a good deal of Cuban socialist literature is also associated with a notion of aesthetic value that conveys a sense of social prestige, because it is considered a superior and differentiated social practice in a society where symbolic power has been highly regarded. Therefore, the Cuban intellectual class has subscribed to its own elitism in the name of making peace with the revolution (13-14), and also for pragmatic reasons of self-preservation, among others. De Ferrari's analysis is linked with Bourdieu's notion that taste and aesthetic judgment are related to the administration of social capital (Idem). In the shifting and loosened conditions of the Special Period, some intellectuals, writers and artists were able to gain certain economic control over their work and travel abroad without losing their citizenship privileges. That was possible as long as they were able to find someone or an institution abroad to assume full responsibility for their invitation and travel expenses. However, the leverage gained by intellectuals since the Special Period is a fragile and still constrained space, due to the highly ideological character of the national project, where cultural production and the exercise of aesthetic criticism is ultimately legitimated by the institutional framework. For De Ferrari:

(...) intellectual labor as a concrete social practice is persistently restricted in the name of the "health" of the revolutionary project. The dependence on government to sponsorship for the creation and dissemination of intellectual work tends to compromise it. Artists must be accountable for their work vis. a vis. governmental expectations that although not clearly spelled out, are binding and powerfully so. (*Community* 16)

This delicate balance for artistic creation still present in revolutionary cultural practice, together with the sudden generalized deteriorating economic and living conditions of the time of crisis, forced many other intellectuals and writers to migrate sooner or later. That was the case for Guillermo Rosales, Carlos Victoria, Jesús Díaz, Abilio Estévez, Antonio José Ponte, Iván de la Nuez, Eliseo Alberto Diego, Rafael Rojas, among many others.

For those post-soviet writers who decided to stay, one of the greatest challenges since the crisis was their utopian desire to maintain their cultural activity simultaneously free of the pressures of an international market and of the ideological restrictions historically imposed by the government (De Ferrari *Community* 18). Despite that complex context of agency that Cuban intellectuals, artists and writers had to maneuver, the post-crisis opening for tourism, access to foreign markets, and the dollarization of the economy created spaces for alternative and more openly disengaged literary voices.

That is the context of *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* to which Gutiérrez reacts to. *Trilogía* is a novel composed of three sections of short stories and is part of a pentology known as “El Ciclo Centrohabana”.¹ For critic Desiderio Navarro, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez is a *tamizdat* writer, who depicts a distinctive condition acquired by some Cuban writers of the nineties narrative boom.² For Whitfield:

Tamizdat refers to a writer who resides in Cuba, with little institutional affiliation on the island, whose literary work is published mainly abroad and is basically available to readers and critics through no official channels. (“Un arte” 17)

Pedro Juan, *Trilogía*'s protagonist and narrator, had a relatively normal life before the crisis: he had a stable job as a journalist, was married, had kids and used to live with his family. The crisis left him without a job and family, living in a crumbling solar (*tenement*) in Centro Habana—one of the most forgotten and marginal neighborhoods in Havana—and progressively succumbing to a permanent state of alienation. The novel is narrated in the first person with semiautobiographical elements, where fiction and reality intertwined. Pedro Juan, the narrator, recreates in a very detailed and reiterative manner how the crisis hardened him as an individual, and made him abandon all ethics in order to survive. Hence, his following claustrophobic monologue: “Tenía tres opciones: o me endurecía, o me volvía loco, o me suicidaba. Así que era fácil decidir: tenía que endurecerme” (Gutiérrez 29). The options for survival were not many for those not close enough to government circles, with no access to foreign currency, not brave or crazy enough to live on the edge of illegality, or with no family abroad to receive foreign currency. People either bowed to the institutional bureaucracy, earning little or not enough money to make ends meet, or migrated or alienated themselves. Alienation was Pedro Juan's option.

Casamayor identifies a modern literary tradition of *el absurdo* (the absurd) in Cuban literature in authors like Reynaldo Arenas. Characters succumbed in anguish and desperation because they are convinced of the impossibility to find any solution to the chaos they live in. They do not intend to escape but embrace that situation as their main ethical project, falling to the bottom of marginality and adopting (a quasi-) animalistic existence (*Utopía* 29:185-187). Following this logic, Casamayor regards Pedro Juan as an *absurd* subject, dominated by desperation, full of bitterness and whose existential choice is not to take anything seriously. On the contrary, he immerses himself in the most profound cynicism, getting rid of all his previous (moral) convictions (215).

Quiroga explains the bitterness in the revolutionary subject coming from the power of the state. It's the state that allows the subject to

constitute itself. The state classifies and distinguishes citizens from noncitizens, those who belong and those who do not. It provides its own vision for the future and repeatedly motivates citizens to emulate heroic figures in every action. In Quiroga's opinion, there is no real redemptive power to bitterness because it remains within the temporal framework of a relationship with the state (17-18). In different moments of the novel, Pedro Juan, as narrator and protagonist, repeats a series of phrases to capture the reader's attention about his existential trajectory from the revolution into the crisis, where depression, fear of loneliness, stress and wilderness led him to become a bitter character:

“Estuve encerrado dentro de mí, derrumbándome dentro de mí” (...) (29); “(...) yo seguía desequilibrado y me parecía excesiva mi soledad” (35); “La claustrofobia fue tan horrible que a veces me despertaba sobresaltado de noche y salía corriendo de la cama. Me sentía encerrado dentro de la noche, dentro del cuarto, dentro de mí (...) (29); (...) no percibía que era un gran muerto de hambre. Un digno y romántico muerto de hambre (...) (32-33); “Así, Nada de paz y tranquilidad (...)” (121). (Gutiérrez)

Pedro Juan's bitterness certainly could be understood as a consequence of his transition. In the past his subject identity was heavily constructed by the ideology, illusions, morals and actions of state-power during the revolutionary period. Then he moves to a place of emptiness resulting from the distressing effects of the nineties crisis. Despair, loss of faith, bare survival and abandonment shapes his lack of sensibility, his thoughts and agency as an individual. Pedro Juan's existence is trapped in the absurdity of a chaotic national situation that doesn't provide a way-out for most of its former beneficiaries.

For Lechner, the history of the human being in the West has been the story of the rationalization of life (132). A certain disdain and lack of trust in the determinism of science, and in the legitimate character of modern metanarratives, prompted the return to disenchantment and skepticism at the end of the 20th century. Although disenchantment has been a recurrent existential topic, it has gained renewed traction by being associated with postmodern attitudes. If Weber considers disenchantment linked to a modern attitude of disbelief in the rules of religiosity of the world (123-124), for Lechner the idea of a postmodern condition implies disenchantment with modernity. In that regard, disenchantment could be understood not only as the loss of illusions and/or suspicion of modern metanarratives as ordering frameworks to imagine the future, but also as a reinterpretation of desire, of rethinking politics (Idem). Disenchantment as a postmodern attitude is also associated with the loss of faith in the state, as an apparatus of domination and control that embodies the collective will against the individual. Lechner sees a

constructive dimension in postmodern disenchantment, as it offers a possibility of re-signifying reality. This dimension is threatening, because it destroys familiar landscapes, and therefore creates uncertainty and fear of loss. It's also stimulating for its potential for change and for tolerating a plurality of rationalities vs. the false homogenization imposed by modern formal rationality (129-133). Based on these premises, Pedro Juan is a postmodern disenchanted subject. Through his behavior as the main character and in his reflections as the novel's narrator, Pedro Juan is constantly conveying his frustration with and disregard for the metanarratives of the revolutionary national project.

Pedro Juan, the author, confirms in an interview the autobiographical elements of his disenchantment in the midst of the Special Period that he transfers to the novel:

...cuando comienzo a escribir *Trilogía* estaba en medio de una crisis personal muy fuerte, muy aguda, muy violenta, que me probó. Incluso, a veces tuve hasta intenciones suicidas, una cosa terrible, verte sin dinero, sin comida, "embarca'o", solo, la casa sin muebles, una situación terrible para una persona que no estaba acostumbrada a vivir así. Yo había sido un periodista de alto nivel de confianza, siempre con carro, una casa y el refrigerador lleno de comida, con una familia, viajando por todas partes y de pronto me quedé sin nada. El país entrando en una crisis económica, política y social muy aguda que culmina quizás, se supone que termina con la crisis de los balseros en agosto del 94, y en esa situación comienzo a escribir lo que yo nunca había escrito. ("Pedro Juan" Parte 1)

Lechner warns that after a certain point, disenchantment ceases to be a beneficial loss of illusion and transforms into a dangerous loss of meaning (136). Pedro Juan the author reached that nadir when he contemplated suicide in the middle of the crisis. The novel abounds in those "low" moments, like when he got jailed and put into solitary confinement for working as a male prostitute for foreign female tourists. In the text he converted his disenchantment into a personal and anguishing crusade to forget about everything. His present moment in the novel is a lost time that doesn't count, where there's no opportunity for any collective redemption or utopia. During the Special Period, Pedro Juan's existential and material degradation is the norm, not only for him but also for most of the characters. The sense of history and/or personal progression he experienced when he was part of the system as a civilized revolutionary no longer exists: the present moment is the only time that really counts for him.

There is a time in the novel in which Pedro Juan still had illusions as an individual to change the context with his actions. When he was working as a journalist, he became so frustrated with the weight of the

state censorship that he decided to write raw and heartbreaking short stories. That explains his option to write as an act of resistance. Pedro Juan, the narrator, says:

En tiempos tan desgarradores no se puede escribir suavemente. Sin delicadezas a nuestro alrededor, imposible fabricar textos exquisitos. Escribo para pinchar un poco y obligar a otros a oler la mierda. Hay que bajar el hocico al piso y oler la mierda. Así aterrorizo a los cobardes y jodo a los que gustan amordazar a quienes podemos hablar. (Gutiérrez 97)

But his act of writing is not aimed at inscribing his work in the Cuban canon of “high literature” through an exploration of forms, styles or a repertoire of references and intertextuality. The rawness of his contextual circumstances impose the need to immerse the readers into the roughest aspects of the Cuban reality of the nineties. At the same time, the fictionality of the novel reveals the explicit intention of Gutiérrez to disturb, provoke and shock the reader. Pedro Juan the narrator tries to convince the reader in several instances that the protagonist reached a point of no return, of ideological disillusionment and no compromise with any modern metanarrative. That attitude is associated with his postmodern disenchantment.

El problema es que en la vida te vas agotando, sencillamente, y a estas alturas de mi vida yo no creo ni en la política ni en los políticos, ni creo en las ideologías de ningún tipo, ni de izquierda, ni de derecha, ni de centro (...) Yo me entregué muchísimo a un proyecto revolucionario humanista, pero llegó un momento en que me agoté, por razones que no voy a analizar ahora, y me dije: “hasta aquí, a partir de ahora me voy a dedicar a la literatura”. Desilusión total con la política y con los políticos; con todos y creo que soy coherente: no creo que las ideologías puedan resolver los problemas de este planeta. (“Pedro Juan” Parte 4)

In that same interview, Gutiérrez recognized that writing was his choice for coping with his own disenchantment and despair. Literature became his escape, a fictional space of refuge and agency to deal with the challenges posed by the crisis. In a chapter with a title that speaks for itself, “Yo, revolcador de mierda,” Pedro Juan referred to a short story he is writing, censored in Spain because of its strong reference to profanity. He recognized that the story could not be considered good. However, what was important for him was reality as such, as it was depicted on the streets. “You take it with both hands, and if you are strong enough you let it fall over the white sheet of paper, unaltered, says Pedro Juan. Sometimes reality was so brutal that people don’t even believe it” (Gutiérrez 119). In this interplay between reality and fiction, Pedro Juan tries to provide authenticity to the author’s text and, at the same time, compels the reader to believe in his different stories and

depictions of reality with no reservations.

The shift to a post-soviet nation for the revolutionary intellectual also implies a certain sense of loss, a transition away from the socialist metanarrative's paternalism. For Rojas, that metanarrative promoted a precise sense of history and a tangible representation of each individual's personal destiny, protected by the notion of state's sovereignty ("Duelo e Ideal"). Could that post-soviet sense of nostalgia be another marketing strategy for the writers of the nineties? "As the market threatened to usurp revolutionary dogma as the antagonist of aesthetic integrity..." (Whitfield *Cuban Currency* 87), Whitfield identifies a sense of fear "as both apprehension and excitement" with the changes in the status quo and the new rules of the game (87). The writers of the nineties were born and raised under the paternalistic and controlling cultural policies of the revolutionary national project. All of the sudden, they had to engage with the uncertainties of the outside world and the market demands. The sense of nostalgia for the revolutionary past in *Trilogía* depicts the vacuum created by the collective and individual paradigmatic shift. The crisis unleashes a process of dispossession of the centrality of the revolutionary national project in the identity, agency and cosmology of the Cuban subject. The moral and ethical coordinates of that subject experienced an important shift. The patriarchal and altruistic collective will of the "New Man" was displaced by the most pressing and dark existential circumstances of survival of the individual. The new moment was marked by absence of illusions, indifference and disbelief in any alternative project of progress in the short or long term.

Marginality

Gutiérrez is one of the 90s' authors that focuses more openly on marginality as his privileged locus of enunciation to re-imagine the social body of the Cuban nation. This push to the limits of representation has been associated with a shift from writers' dependence on state institutions and the moral values of the "New Man," to the demands of the international market in the midst of the crisis. Gutiérrez's narrative could be located in what Whitfield calls sociological literature, where there is a primacy of theme over form, a sort of denunciatory realism that features an intense thematic focus on the social failings of Cuba's national revolutionary project (*Cuban Currency* 88-89). In the extra literary field, Gutiérrez repeatedly disregards this opinion.³

Throughout the novel, Pedro Juan lives recurring moments where he is perfecting his disaffection and existential stance of avoiding any rationality. However, he has some instances of reflection about the failures of the national project that led to the crisis. Referring to the revolutionary

times, Pedro Juan says that “Cuba en plena construcción del socialismo era de una pureza virginal, de un delicioso estilo Inquisicional (...) (13). However, as he embarks on a historical assessment in times of crisis he realizes that after “treinta y cinco años construyendo el socialismo. Ya se acabó. Ahora hay que cambiar a esto otro. Y rápido” (111). His different short stories throughout the novel intensively recreate a world of no morals, other than those that ensure survival. The stories are infused with marginal characters, especially of black people, who act exclusively to find something to eat and to trade in the black market, in search for dollars. Their spare time is spent mostly satisfying the most pressing bodily pleasures and addictions, removed from any sense of collective morals or affection.

The propulsion to a denunciatory realism and testimonial literature makes the study of the narratives of the nineties more complex. The focus on the marginal has also been identified as a marketing strategy related to certain expectations, mainly from outside the island, on what a Cuban author should write about in times of crisis about the socialist experience. “Marginal” authors of the nineties like Gutiérrez, Ena Lucía Portela and Zoe Valdés, among others, acquired a rapid commercial success outside the island. Before the crisis, writers felt compelled to endorse a notion of “true literature” as a mechanism of symbolic hierarchical differentiation, which assumes the possibility of cultural production beyond the context of power relationships. Power structures, either cultural institutions or the market, shape the content of cultural production in any given socio-historical circumstances. However, the “marginal” narratives of Gutiérrez and Portela cannot be attributed to a sensationalist interest to please the publishing international market during the nineties. Both authors reflect the need, as intellectuals born and shaped by a socialist cosmology, to engage in their literary work with the unique dramatic circumstances of change they witnessed. The Special Period was such a devastating moment, not only sociologically but also at the individual level, that it was impossible to avoid. Authors also took advantage of the possibilities that opened up for some writers during the nineties in the international market, which in a way aligned the author’s cultural production with the demands of the market. Their emphasis on the recreation of the marginal could have annoyed those mainly concerned with the preservation of “high” literature. However, literary production is part of the socio-historical context where it takes places.

One of the most incisive manifestations of the marginal is the important presence of *el solar* in Centro Habana, as the novel’s urban setting and symbolic space. *El solar* portrays a generalization of chaos and decadence, lack of life alternatives and recourse to illegality. It’s a space for wasting time, of rising violence, crime and prostitution, proliferation of

overcrowded living units, lack of minimal sanitary conditions (including potable water) and of rampant deterioration of buildings left to decay. Gutiérrez's description of an old elevator suggests the decadence of an urban site full of odors the reader can virtually smell:

Es un viejo aparato de los años treinta, quiero decir que tiene rejas y es abierto. Es feo porque es americano, no como aquellos hermosos ascensores europeos de esa época que todavía trabajan suavemente en los hoteles del boulevard de la Villette y en otros barrios viejos de París. Este es un cacharro más tosco y simple. Muy oscuro porque los vecinos se roban los bombillos y con una peste permanente a orina, porquería y a los vómitos diarios de un borracho del cuarto piso. Uno sube y baja lentamente mirando el paisaje alrededor; cemento, pedazos de escalera, oscuridad, otro pedazo de escalera, las puertas de cada piso, alguien que espera y al fin se decide a seguir por la escalera, porque el ascensor se detiene cuando quiere y donde más le gusta. Muchas veces decide detenerse sin coincidir con las puertas de salida. Frente a uno solo está la pared de cemento áspero del pozo, y la gente grita: "¡Ah, sáquenme de aquí, coño, que esto se trabó!". (28)

El solar is a representation of a forgiving space, where important sectors of the Cuban population are abandoned to their own fate by the crisis, despite the socialist state's sustained rhetoric of collective solidarity and altruism for the common good.⁴ Like all this debris, for Casamayor the promises and convictions of the socialist project were also dismantled (*Utopías* 228). Gutiérrez provides a detailed and closed picture of the process of progressive dehumanization suffered by many as a result of the crisis. According to Whitfield, *el solar* was cosmetically cleaned up in post 59 literature, but in the nineties it is reclaimed (*Cuban Currency* 115).

The relationship between Omar and Berta is an example of this return of the *solar*. Omar is a young and attractive jobless *mestizo* who recently moved to *el solar* and who was flirting with Berta. Berta was an old and lonely widow who progressively had locked herself up in her apartment in the next to last floor of her building, where she preserved some old valuables. Her living space was full of debris and, since the elevator did not work, she hardly walked or went outside. As she got older, she was losing her physical strength and was increasingly scared. Berta did not have much to eat because her pension was not enough and she did not have any family to take care of her. Omar... "es la miseria en persona" (Gutiérrez 364). As he doesn't have or know any other means to survive, Omar devotes himself to seducing people in order to get anything from them, which is the case with Berta. After seducing and ultimately having sex with Berta, she decided to include him in her testament as the sole beneficiary, leaving him with her house and all her

material possessions. Then he disappears because he was living with a younger albeit mature woman who provides for him. Berta succumbs to sadness and then dies.

For Casamayor:

“la inhumanidad” de los protagonistas de Gutiérrez se reconoce sobre todo en la carencia de proyección futura de sus acciones, marcadas por el hambre y otras pulsaciones irracionales. (Sus) actos se circunscriben al momento en que suceden, provocando una sensación de lentitud existencial. (*Utopías* 219)

The literary choice of many authors to deal with the most heart-breaking parts of the shifting realities of the revolutionary national project has raised some controversial critiques. That was dealt with in articles and debates on the island, eloquently summed up by Whitfield in *Cuban Currency*. Some attribute Gutiérrez’s emphasis on the marginal characters and places in his novels to a selling strategy, a response to the European publishing market’s demands of what was expected to be narrated about the crisis in the last stronghold of the socialist bloc in the Western hemisphere. Others, like Victor Fowler, at the time implicitly criticized *Los Novísimos* writers for what he considered their self-imposed and self-indulgent retreat from society, as countercultural rebels and practitioners of foreign cultural models. Fowler’s critique echoed the modernist inclination to preserve the notion of “true” literature as a privileged space of symbolic distinction, as pointed out by De Ferrari. On the other hand, Portela addressed the distinct exploration of the underground life in Cuban literary production in the 1990s as a response to the insistence of the official discourse to avoid representing the crisis, and to the foreign market’s interest in unveiling it. Although aware of the distinctions between falsified and genuine marginalities, Portela considers Gutiérrez’s depiction of the marginal as rigorously faithful to details. The journal *Temas* also had a debate on the topic in 2001, referred to by Whitfield, in which some critics connected the increased visibility of marginality to unveiling other avoided topics such as racial discrimination and prejudice (*Cuban Currency* 110-112). On the debate about marginality Whitfield’s considers that:

The foregrounding by Cuban literary and social critics of subjects whose marginal position is defined by their socioeconomic and racial status intersects with foreign reader’s privileging of subjects who are recognizably Cubans for this very same status, and it places Gutiérrez’s books, mapped out against the margins of Centro Habana, at the vanguard of the period’s literature. (*Idem* 112)

The focus of *Trilogía* in the representation of marginality prompted by the crisis deconstructs and updates the inconsistencies generated by

privileging an altruistic and homologous discourse of the “New Man” in the revolutionary cosmology. The marginal in the nineties literature is “a terrain for discovery,” because it exposes the accumulation of postponed existential and material dilemmas in the Cuban social fabric. Those dilemmas were avoided by the intellectual debate and were ultimately subordinated to the priorities of the nation-state, like the exporting of “the achievements of the revolution” mystifying discourse. The focus on the marginal also sheds light on the accumulation of other group needs, not necessarily represented in the revolutionary national discourse, such as women, blacks, LGTBQ, migrants and the forgotten. For Quiroga, by the late 1990s the individual is at the center of aesthetics, and marginality becomes a valid literary theme occupying the space left by the relative demise of the institutional network (140-141). This individual is represented in the novel by the preponderance of a first person narrative voice, which according to Sarabia constitutes an attempt to recuperate the loss of subjectivity in the process of collectivization and homogenization implicit in the utopian revolutionary project (86).

Wilderness

Trilogía privileges a tradition of realism in novels, more specifically the aesthetics of Dirty Realism, through the use of narrative strategies like the explicit, overwhelming and detailed recreation of dark and underground contexts of decadence.⁵ Together with marginality, Gutiérrez’s characters are immersed in a life driven by wilderness, a sort of barbaric existence led by all sorts of addictions and primordial impulses. Those resources are the only path left to the individuals’ liberation in the midst of the surrounding chaos. For Quiroga, the seduction of Gutiérrez’s stories lies in a combination of aesthetic realism and freedom from constraint (138).

The crisis translated in lack of sustainable living options for many in the island. Therefore, people massively migrated or abruptly transitioned to survival strategies. Pedro Juan did not contemplate the exile option. Hence, in order to stay in the island he dispensed with the socialist aspirations for high morals and exemplary social behavior of the “New Man.” Pedro Juan and the marginal characters of the novel are the “New Man’s” moral antithesis, commonly using alcohol and drugs, making recourse to sexual promiscuity and violence as mechanisms of evasion, interaction, socialization, and instant gratification. The narrator insists to familiarize the reader with details of the underground and hopeless world Cubans were subjected to as a result of the crisis. For De Ferrari, “the strategies used to define hyperrealism as an ethic of representation are a blunt factuality, a sensorial overload, and an exaggerated

materiality” (*Community* 165).

The novel’s story “Salíamos de las jaulas” begins with a photographic witnessing by Pedro Juan, the narrator, of the dealings of some marginal black men with a dead horse abandoned in the countryside:

Llegué a la casa de un guajiro y el tipo tenía un caballo muerto tirado en el patio. Ya con la panza medio hinchada. Apenas lograba contener a los negros: un enjambre de negros, con machetes, cuchillos y sacos. Querían descuartizar el animal y llevárselo a pedazos. Era una jauría. Los conté: ocho negros, flacos, hambrientos, sucios, con los ojos desorbitados, vestidos con harapos. El guajiro les explicaba que el animal murió enfermo y se pudría rápidamente. Ellos no le discutían. Solo le pedían sacarle un pedazo y ellos mismos enterrarían la cabeza, los cascos, lo que quedara de aquel animal sarnoso y esquelético, cubierto de moscas verdes. Por el culo le salían gusanos y pus. (Gutiérrez 162)

In this passage there is a detailed and graphic description of the different parts of the horse’s putrefaction. The account is not only intensely visual, but led the reader to experience the images through visual, olfactory and tactile senses, a strategy that is repeated and successfully achieved in different parts of the text. Not only is the image depiction centered on the horse, additional details are provided about the denigrating material and existential condition of the human characters. The narrator describes meticulously how poorly these characters are dressed and how physically deteriorated they look, which reinforces the grotesque atmosphere of the scene. Moreover, the tone used by the narrator to refer to the characters—who happen to be marginal blacks—and to describe their violent intentions, is openly derogative by associating them with a crowd of animals. The contrast created by the animalization of the characters on one hand, and the denigrating materiality of the scene on the other hand, results in a shocking image consciously composed to create a strong impact around a certain representation of reality. The novel is heavily charged with similar grotesque detailed images that are difficult to avoid, and eventually convince the reader she is experiencing firsthand a verisimilar context of chaos and human degradation.

The representation of black men and women as bestialized subjects referred to is not an isolated passage, but a common trope throughout the novel.⁶ As a marginal character in Centro Habana, Pedro Juan coexists and interacts with other blacks that are presented as the most marginal and most affected subjects of the crisis. However, in his condition as writer, narrator and ultimately “a detached voyeur” (*Whitfield Cuban Currency* 117) of the marginal, he situates himself at a remove from blacks. For Pedro Juan, black people are the ones occupying the lowest place in the social scale. This is reinforced by his use of a systematic monolithic and denigrating language to talk about blacks, which

reproduces essentialist modern stereotypes of black bodies in terms of otherness, animalization and inferiority.⁷ According to Pedro Juan the narrator “los negros son así” (Gutiérrez 17), and throughout the text he recreates different scenes and provides his observations to explain these essentialist views, i.e.: they don’t clean themselves often, they are used to live in filthy places with minimal or unsanitary conditions, they are noisy, rude and have a strong smell and they are continually associated with excremental and eschatological representations (Cornejo Parriego 12). In the narrative, blacks are eager to eat anything they find, regardless of its quality, and they are not very smart. In addition, the black male bodies are represented as the most phallic ones, confirming Fanon’s identification of black males in Western culture with their genitals as a social threat (qtd. in Cornejo-Parriego 13). According to Cornejo-Parriego, *Trilogía* ignores AfroCubans’ specific history and conditions, to offer a decontextualized, superficial and external picture of them, which is compulsively obsessed with the black body, sexuality and that recycles a colonial legacy. This legacy plays a double function of converting the black body into the symbol of the crisis of the Cuban nation and the (revolutionary) utopia, and ensures selling this body—transformed into novel—in the global market (10).⁸ In his personal trajectory to alienation in the midst of the crisis, Pedro Juan chooses to live among black marginals as a sort of salvation, because they are bearers of what Casamayor calls “una distopía apocalíptica” (apocalyptic dystopia) (247). He wants to emulate this condition to a certain extent, which is very functional for his *absurd* existence. In his view, black people are not worried about the future. They have fragile links with the society’s ethical values and maintain a certain joy of life, despite the burden of their daily lives (*Utopía* 248).

Referring to *las mulatas*, Pedro Juan says that “son muy racistas. Mucho más que las blancas y las negras. No sé qué sucede pero no resisten a los negros” (Gutiérrez 175). On other occasions, Pedro Juan seems to believe in the supremacy of *mestizos*, as better than black and white persons (Gutiérrez 163). That is a widespread notion in Cuban culture that classifies blacks on the basis of how white or black they are perceived to be. Cornejo-Parriego’s analysis reveals the presence of colonial notions of pigmentocracy and imperatives to “improve” the race in the Cuban revolutionary national project. They are associated with concepts of whitening and *mestizaje* which are still signified with progress (15).

For Casamayor, “el desenfreno posibilita la resistencia del sujeto a la crisis post-soviética cubana. Tal resistencia consiste en abandonarse a sí mismo en el caos, sin preocuparse por el futuro, la trascendencia o la perduración del cuerpo” (“Soñando” 559-560). Pedro Juan’s bodily reaction to the crisis is to abandon himself to a frenetic state of wilderness. One of the most salient manifestations of that wild existence is

constantly getting lost in the excesses of the body through the consummation, voyeurism or planning of all kinds of graphic and promiscuous acts of sex. “El sexo desenfrenado me ayudaba a escapar de mí mismo (Gutiérrez 28) says Pedro Juan, as one of his most prominent ethical statements. He adds:

El sexo no es para gente escrupulosa. El sexo es un intercambio de líquidos, de fluidos, saliva, aliento y olores fuertes, orina, semen, mierda, sudor, microbios, bacterias. O no es. Si sólo es ternura y espiritualidad etérea entonces se queda en una parodia estéril de lo que pudo ser. Nada. (Gutiérrez 5)

Throughout the novel sex is one of the most important sources of instant gratification in the Special Period. It is used as one of the few resources available for individuals to feel liberated from daily hardships. In the novel, sex is also represented as one of the most visible commodities of the crisis, contributing to the displacement of the “New Man” morals. For some men and females, sex during the crisis was used as a commodity, to trade with foreign currency, services and have access to venues mostly destined for foreign tourists. It was also used to obtain products for daily subsistence and as an opportunity to leave the island. For De Ferrari, Gutiérrez’s texts promote the notion that tropical sex is a repository of Cubanness, an essence of national identity that has not been jeopardized by history (“Abjection” 207). The representation and jargon of “hypersexuality” in *Trilogía* could shock and create apprehension because of its transgressive character. This interpretation is linked with assumptions of traditionally ethical and politically correct norms in the heterosexual and patriarchal revolutionary cosmology.

Pedro Juan’s most febrile and graphic sexual desires as a white heterosexual male are idealized and performed with the bodies of several blacks and *mulata* women, a choice that for Casamayor represents the protagonist’s decadence (*Utopía* 248). The bodies of black and *mulata* women are portrayed as the most available for lustful sex. *Mulata* and black women are portrayed as more sexually liberated and less prejudiced, ready to please the heterosexual male fantasies with minimal regard for affection. The narrator also suggests that black and *mulata* women are more driven to become prostitutes, and in some cases even enjoy being mistreated. That stereotypical representation of the readiness and availability of the female black body to be possessed could be read as a reinforcement of a traditional trope of tropical exoticism that sells in the international market. In Pedro Juan’s view, black women are also prone to reproduce racial differentiation in the sexual terrain, by socially valorizing lighter skin blacks and white males as their ultimate objects of desire for social and economic mobility. Referring to his

relationship with Miriam, a lighter *mestiza* and one of her lovers, he says:

Su falta de pudor llegaba a la grosería. Y eso me gustaba. Yo cada día era más indecente. A ella le gustaban los negros bien negros, para sentirse superior. Siempre me lo decía: ‘son groseros, pero les digo, inegro, échate pa’ allá!, y yo estoy por arriba porque soy clarita como la canela’. En realidad era aún más clara que la canela y todo lo valoraba así: los más negros abajo, los más claros arriba. Yo intenté explicarle, pero no quería cambiar de opinión. Me decía que no era así. Bueno, daba igual. Que se quedara con sus ideas. (Gutiérrez 49)

Pedro Juan’s particular scale of sexual values is shaped by widespread colonial stereotypes and myths about *mestizaje*. He associates black women with dirt and the irrational (Casamayor “Negros” 67), while expressing his preference for *mulatas* who are “delusional and insatiable” (Gutiérrez 172). It has been suggested that the loosening of morals of the “New Man” provoked by the crisis is color-blind. However, it is evident that the kind of liberalization for black people represented in *Trilogía* is retrograde and degrading. The novel shows how the shifting context led to further marginalization of the black population. Pedro Juan as a narrator adopts a view permeated by colonial conceptions about race, considering black people as “un objeto de repulsión, y al mismo tiempo de atracción y fascinación en el imaginario occidental” (Cornejo-Parriego 20). Although in interviews Gutiérrez recognizes being cruel and merciless with the construction of his characters, he refers this literary strategy to the aesthetics of Dark Realism. In his view, he explores the deepest and most antagonistic conflicts of human beings, aggravated by the crisis’ reality, regardless of how morally controversial it may result for some readers.⁹ For Casamayor, Pedro Juan’s gaze towards his black characters is stereotypical and projects fatalism and weariness. However, in her opinion, that does not prevent recognition that the hostile world he describes is very real: “Su mirada desolada y cruel permite denunciar las miserables condiciones de vida de los negros marginales en los convulsos 90s” (“Negros” 67).

A focus on ethics of marginality and wilderness is a privileged locus of enunciation in the nineties Cuban literature. As a result, the exoticism of the marginal became the context, subject, theme and prevalent image not only in literature, but in other cultural fields like music and film. For Whitfield, the new orientation of the narrative of the nineties towards the marginal provides a way to see a Cuba that the Cold World had kept off limits. It implies a distrust of the official rhetoric that until the crisis obscured the sensual and personal dimensions under propagandistic optimism (*Cuban Currency* 109).

Conclusion

Trilogía is among those literary texts that best capture important shifts in the Cuban literary field since the nineties. Gutiérrez re-signified the use of testimonial and journalistic strategies in the revolutionary literary tradition. *Trilogía* documents the crisis of the socialist metanarrative of the Cuban revolution, by moving the spotlight from the collective incarnation of the “New Man” to the voice of the forgotten individual massively converted into marginal being. Cuban literature of the nineties also dwell on the generalization of material and existential distress prompted by the crisis. The narrators’ voice and gaze provides a close up of the disintegration of the promises and illusions of the discursive revolutionary utopia and the new harsh realities, i.e.: generalized hunger, lack of basic services and products for daily subsistence, the urge to procure foreign currency at any cost, the commodification of the body, the expansion of a landscape of material deterioration and ruins, the further marginalization of black people and the generalization of a survival mode. Gutiérrez’s focuses on the recreation of the marginal and underground world and subjects through a scatological and irreverent prose. The marginal is a logical site of exploration for post-soviet Cuban writers, who gained certain independence from the hegemonic discourse and the tutelage of the institutional framework. Due to the space gained in the international market, these authors acquired leverage to negotiate a different literary place in the island’s post-soviet cultural context in their own terms.

In *Trilogía*, the fictional game with literature became a liberatory space, to counteract the disconnection of the frenetic triumphalism of the official national discourse with the dramatic changes prompted by the crisis. The post-revolutionary subject that emanates in this novel is transgressive, because the national project is no longer the center of that subject’s imaginary or agency. Instead, the narrative raises immediate questions pertaining to the individual realm, silenced or postponed by the revolutionary ideology. Disbelief in metanarratives, ideologies and institutions of power, a permanent pursuit of survival, and the search for immediate sources of gratification are among some of the new ethical coordinates of the post-Soviet subject in *Trilogía*. Those symbolic coordinates challenge dominant constructions about the revolutionary national subject in morals and ethics terms.

Notes

- ¹ In addition to *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* (1998), *El Ciclo Centro Habana* pentalogy is composed by the following text: *El Rey de La Habana* (The King of Havana) (1999), *Animal tropical* (Tropical Animal) (2000), *El insaciable hombre araña* (The Insatiable Spiderman) (2002) and *Carne de perro* (Dog Meat) (2003). See <www.pedrojuangutierrez.com>.
- ² According to the online Britannic Encyclopedia, the term *tamizdat* defines: "...Second, unofficial literature written within the Soviet Union that came to include works circulated illegally in typewritten copies ("samizdat"), smuggled abroad for publication ("tamizdat"), written "for the drawer" or not published until decades after they were written ("delayed" literature)." According to Desiderio Navarro, in "Media res publica" the term: "Designa las ediciones norteamericanas y eurooccidentales de textos de autores soviéticos y de otros países del bloque socialista que, por decisiones gubernamentales, no podían ser publicados en sus respectivos países de origen".
- ³ Several interviews to Pedro Juan Gutiérrez are available online, where he repeatedly denies any intention to make his literary work a reflection of the economic and social circumstances of the 90s crisis and the Special Period. However, he recognizes the autobiographical elements of his character Pedro Juan with his life in Havana at the time. This apparent incongruence is typical of the constant negotiations that intellectuals living in the island need to go through as commented on before, in order to preserve their status and trying to avoid a direct confrontation with the cultural apparatus and its censorship.
- ⁴ According to Candía Cáceres, in *Trilogía*, Gutiérrez articulates a process of de-canonization of the monumental city made in the narrative of Alejo Carpentier and Lezama Lima, and complements the demystification of Havana carried out in the works of Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Severo Sarduy and Reinaldo Arenas (51-52). See also Moulin Civil.
- ⁵ Gutiérrez's Dirty Realism has been referenced as a Caribbean version of Bukowski that pushes the limits of the genre as a "wild" literary trend. It recovers the marginality of North American streets and of themes related with alcoholism, sexuality, wilderness sex, prostitution and homosexuality. Among many critics, Bolaño identifies similitudes between Bukowski and Gutiérrez: "Una vida de

múltiples trabajos, la mayoría aparentemente no relacionados con la literatura, un éxito tardío, una escritura sencilla, (...) unos temas comunes, como las mujeres, el alcohol y la lucha por sobrevivir” (213). According to Sierra Madero: “Los términos literatura sucia o “realismo sucio”... tienen que ver con la concepción higiénica y pudorosa ...y con las nociones de alta o baja cultura, lo letrado o lo iletrado; con creencias, códigos o prejuicios institucionalizados sobre lo sucio, lo limpio, lo bueno, lo malo, lo impropio, lo abyecto, lo obsceno, lo marginal; concepción en la que subyacen valoraciones que abarcan no sólo la literatura sino todas las relaciones sociales y que le reduce posibilidades de desarrollo a temáticas culturales alternativas respecto de lo considerado como la verdadera cultura” (“Literatura sucia” 29-30).

- ⁶ For additional references about wilderness, see Berlant.
- ⁷ On the animalization of blacks, see also Fanon; Hall, *Cuestiones* and De la Fuente.
- ⁸ Cornejo-Parriego indicates that the revolutionary government couldn't suppress discrimination against black people although it advanced some institutional and normative measures to improve their situation, like better access to education, job opportunities and recreational venues. At the same time, the government centralized and eliminated the debate about the racial question (as part of a notion that subordinates it to “the unity” of the revolutionary nation). As a result, several questions related with racism are pending in the public debate. Despite the improvements racial inequalities persist, especially in terms of political representation, economic opportunities, social stratification and marginality. Those questions were particularly aggravated by the nineties' crisis (10-11).
- ⁹ See “Pedro Juan” Partes 1-4.

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