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**THE PRISON-HOUSE OF ALLEGORY:
REFLECTION ON THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION
OF THE CUBAN “SPECIAL PERIOD”**

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The periodization of the Cuban Revolution seems at times almost irresistibly schematic.¹ Though the demise of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites spectacularly inaugurated the nineties in Cuba, the subsequent resilience of Fidel Castro’s government confounded commentators and critics who had predicted its rapid demise. One such prediction was reflected in the title of Andrés Oppenheimer’s 1993 book, *Castro’s Final Hour*. But, as Hugh Thomas pointed out in 1998, “All those who have made such prophesies have had to eat their words, for the end has never come” (1500).

In this essay, it is my intention to gauge, with more breadth than depth, facets of the relationship between the social transformations of Cuba in the nineties and some key instances of the decade’s cultural production. If Heberto Padilla’s arrest and public self-rebuke marked symbolically the cultural end of the sixties, while at the same time ushering in the “grey decade” of the seventies (and eighties), the nineties were best characterized by the so-called “Período Especial en Tiempos de Paz,” the “Special Period” which translated into a time of unprecedented austerity of Cuban citizens with the concomitant development of a luxury tourist industry for foreigners. Ana Julia Jatar-Hausmann summarizes some of the major reforms implemented in Cuba in 1993 and 1994 to help deal with the crisis of Cuba’s rapidly shrinking economy: 1) the legalization of U.S. dollars (when previously even possessing dollars was a serious crime), 2) the appearance of government-sanctioned retail shops, 3) agricultural reform, including the legalization of farmers’ markets and agricultural co-operatives, 4) the

legalization of some forms of self-employment for various services (the well-known *paladares* or family-run restaurants fall under this category), and 5) the implementation of a tax on the nascent private sector (Jatar-Hausmann 61-62). These measures allowed the revolutionary regime to survive its brusque orphanage from the Soviet Union but gave rise to a series of other contradictions – such as highly visible social inequality and rampant and visible prostitution or *jineterismo* – which the Socialist Revolution prided itself on having eliminated years before.

Clearly these reforms were in sharp contradistinction to many of the tenets championed by the socialist regime for decades. It is the tension and pain occasioned by this transition from socialism to a peculiar form of capitalism which was one of the main engines for creative expression in Cuba in the nineties. To give an idea of the profundity of the social and cultural contradictions of the Special Period, Eliseo Alberto, in his powerful testimonial *Informe contra mí mismo*, recalls that an authority of the Communist Youth “recommended” against printing a poem by Nicolás Guillén on the cover of a student newspaper. The poem in question was “Tengo” in which the poet declares:

Tengo
 vamos a ver
 que siendo un negro
 nadie me puede deter
 a la puerta de un dancing o de un bar.
 O bien en la carpeta de un hotel
 gritarme que no hay pieza,
 una mínima pieza y no una pieza colosal,
 una pequeña pieza donde yo pueda descansar.

(What’s mine
 let’s see
 though I’m black
 no one can stop me
 at the door of a dance hall or a bar.
 Or in the lobby of a hotel
 screaming at me that there are no vacancies
 just a tiny room and not a huge suite
 a small room where I can rest.)

What could possibly be objectionable about these verses by the Poet Laureate of the Cuban Revolution, a Revolution which for so long boasted of having eliminated racial discrimination? By the nineties, and as anyone who traveled in Cuba during the Special Period surely noticed, Cubans were no longer allowed access to three-star-and-above hotels, now reserved exclusively for foreign tourists carrying dollars (Alberto 124). Almost

overnight, Guillén's verses went from being the mouthpiece of the Revolution's accomplishments to something mildly subversive.

In the area of cultural production, the nineties seemed, arguably to open up a period of freer expression that had not been seen in over two decades. There are notable exceptions, such as the incarceration of the poet María Elena Cruz Varela, who, in 1991, was not only imprisoned for two years but subject to one of the infamous "actos de repudio" – acts of repudiation, something akin to a modern *auto da fe* – in which she was force-fed her own "counterrevolutionary" poems by a frenzied mob. While the regime still didn't hesitate to crack down on dissidents and especially on expressions of political opposition, people in the nineties seemed to be able to say, and in some instances write, more or less what they wished.

With these fundamental shifts in Cuban society, we need to find new models with which to approach Cuban cultural production since the 90s and the Special Period. Fidel Castro's "Palabras a los intelectuales" ("Words to Intellectuals," 1961) and Che Guevara's "El hombre nuevo" ("The New Man," 1965), texts which laid down a theoretical and practical gauntlet for Cuban artists and writers for the better part of two decades, seem like historical relics today. Senel Paz's *El lobo, el bosque, y el hombre nuevo* ("The Wolf, the Forest, and the New Man," 1991), a minor Cuban classic from the Special Period, certainly evokes both Fidel's and Che's texts – especially Castro's ultimatum about permitting all forms of expression *within* the Revolution but nothing *against* it. But Paz evokes these socialist tenets in a parodying way that underscores their historical distance, and the protagonist David's attempt to apply Fidel's simplistic dualism (*within* or *against* the Revolution) to his own life results in a humorously neurotic narrator who is torn between his revolutionary *conciencia* (consciousness and conscience) and his libidinal fascination for Diego. Like Huckleberry Finn, whose sense of morality is so warped by his racist milieu that his conscience agonizes over helping the slave Jim escape to freedom, David similarly fears he is betraying the Revolution by befriending Diego, an openly gay man. It is significant that the cinematic version of Paz's story, Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*), probably the most famous cultural product of the Special Period, in order to portray a kind of Stalinist mentality embodied in the university student Miguel, used a historical point of view, situating the film in more militant, pre-Mariel Cuba of 1979. In retrospect, Senel Paz's story was in many ways a demarcation line announcing the advent of the nineties and the Special Period in Cuban culture, and the end of older, outmoded ways of thinking about the Cuban Revolution.

While contemporary expression is probably too varied and heterogeneous, as well as too close to the present time, to all the temporal perspective needed for a satisfactory critical account or overview, we can

still begin to outline something like a “sociology of the cultural production of the Special Period.” I will now mention in passing some of these common traits before turning to a discussion of allegory and its peculiarities in Cuban cultural production of the nineties. In a somewhat sweeping approach, emphasizing breadth more than depth, I will comment briefly on examples of fiction, popular music, and film.

One predominant motif from the 90s that sets the period apart from those that preceded it is a particular brand of nostalgia. Nostalgia is such a prevalent characteristic of so many different realms of cultural expression that it could practically be called a trope of modernity. In Cuba, especially in exile writing, nostalgia has been a recurrent motif since the waves of emigrants started leaving the island in the early sixties.² For Cabrera Infante, for instance, nostalgia for pre-1959 Havana seems to be the principle impetus of his creative expression. Even Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, whose seismic novel *Trilogía sucia de la Habana (Dirty Havana Trilogy, 1998)* eschews pathos like the plague, confesses at one point,

Entonces yo era un tipo perseguido por las nostalgias. Siempre lo había sido y no sabía cómo desprenderme de las nostalgias para vivir tranquilamente.”

(At that time I was a guy who was persecuted by nostalgia. I always had been and I didn't know how to get rid of the nostalgia and live peacefully 57).

But if Gutiérrez's aim is to purge himself of nostalgia, other Cuban artists dwell on it in their work. And yet there is something curious about the nostalgia expressed in the songs of the *nuevatrovista*, the song-writer Carlos Varela or in the writing of the exiled novelist Zoé Valdés. In their work, too, there is the expression of a longing not only for the physical space and time of pre-revolutionary Havana, but, especially in Valdés, also a desire to return to the famed nightlife of Havana in the 50s, where well-dressed men and elegant women moved to the sensual accompaniment of Benny Moré's orchestra.³ But what is odd about the nostalgia of *this* generation of artists is that, unlike Cabrera Infante, neither Zoé Valdés, born in 1959, nor Carlos Varela, 1963, *ever lived during this longed-for period in question*. For both artists, Cuban music from the forties and fifties represents one of the portals or apertures which conveys them back to an idealized pre-revolutionary Habana. This idealization, this fictitious nostalgia, seems to me to be an unequivocal symptom, one of many indices of discontent with the end game of the Revolutionary regime.

Valdés, opening a chapter of *Te di la vida entera* with an epigraph from Benny Moré, intones,

Esa era La Habana, colorida, iluminada, ¡Qué bella ciudad, Dios Santo! Y que yo me la perdí por culpa de nacer tarde”

(*That was Havana, colorful, bright. What a beautiful city, my God! And I missed it all because I was born too late.*” 21)

For Carlos Varela, access to the Havana of old is achieved, almost as though they were a Proustian *madeleine*, through the lyrics of Miguel Matamoros’s classic song “Lágrimas negras,” which the singer-songwriter embeds within an original melody:

Aunque tu me has echado en el abandono
aunque ya han muerto todas mis ilusiones,
lloro sin que sepas que este llanto mío
tiene lágrimas negras

(Though you have abandoned me,
though all my hopes have died
I weep while unbeknownst to you my eyes
shed black tears).

The “new” context of these “classic” lyrics about abandonment and disillusionment translates into a commentary on life in Cuba in the Special Period, as Varela seems to be addressing his own government rather than an idealized love object – not unlike the “updated” context which renders Nicolás Guillén’s verses controversial in the nineties. Another of Varela’s vehicles for arriving at an idyllic past are photographs: In one song off his album, *Como los peces* (“Like the fishes” 1994), he speaks about the family members who have departed, and in whose place there remain only photographic images. In another song on the same album, he laments the crumbling and neglected state of present-day Havana (a recurrent theme of the Special Period) while looking at an album of photographs of the city’s colonial past. Once again the music of Trío Matamoros is evoked to capture the essence of the city:

Escuchando a Matamoros
desde un lejano lugar
la Habana guarda un tesoro
que es difícil olvidar

(Listening to Matamoros
from a distant place
Havana conceals a treasure
that is not easily forgotten).

Explicit sexuality is another characteristic of special-period literature that constitutes both a break from and a continuation of earlier periods. The government was almost fanatically puritanical regarding erotic writing during the first decades of the Revolution; the famous chapter seven of Lezama Lima's *Paradiso* is the privileged referent and evidently serves as a model and inspiration for Zoé Valdés. And yet while sex in Lezama Lima's writing pertained to a *recherche baroque* world, the "shocking" sexuality in Valdés' novels is part and parcel of the cry of denunciation which is the end result of her writing. In a country in which Brazilian and Venezuelan soap operas were one of the primary distractions against boredom and hunger, what is one to do during the Special Period, characterized by continual *apagones* or electrical blackouts? Valdés' response is an unmitigated narration of erotic experiences, lyrical homages to friends who have emigrated, with an occasional bleak description of *habaneros* rummaging for food in garbage dumps. Written in exile and therefore unlikely to occasion a "repudiation" for their author, Valdés' novels are an accusatory voice against the pain of contemporary Cuban reality, an unrelenting direct rebuke. Though the reins of "censorship" (in quotation marks, because it has always been something subtle and surreptitious and Cuba), have been somewhat loosened, no writer on the island could permit herself the audacity of ridiculing Fidel as Valdés does in her *Te di la vida entera*. In one scene the narrator is describing a speech by the *Comandante en Jefe*:

Primero citas todas las cifras económicas desde el primer año del triunfo hasta ese instante, *el glorioso período especial*, y hace énfasis en los sacrificios, en estos momentos de crisis y de reformas económicas, y bla, bla, bla...

(First he quotes all the economic data since the first year of the triumph of the revolution until this day, *the glorious Special Period*, and he emphasizes the sacrifices, in this moment of crisis and economic reforms, and blah, blah, blah) (1996, 201).

The description trails off in an ironic verbal ellipsis.

This direct commentary and ridicule is in contrast to the approach of Carlos Varela or Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, who also criticize Cuban society of the 90s, but who are still residents on the island, and must therefore temper their critique. Though these latter artists also comment on and often denounce the regime's policies and other aspects of contemporary Cuban society, they must do so obliquely. They are obligated to cloak this commentary within the folds of another, parallel discourse. That is to say, allegory is almost thrust upon them as the rhetorical trope through which to express these social and political criticisms.

This being the case, some words are in order about Jameson's enduring essay, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,"

which argues that “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). In addition to the objections to the label “Third World” – a term which has fallen into disuse but for which we are still awaiting an appropriate successor – some of the resistance to the idea of the essentially allegorical nature of “third-world” literature⁴ seems to stem from the understanding of *allegory* as a reductive rhetorical trope with limited signifying potential.⁵ Part of the nineteenth-century reaction against allegory, according to de Man, entailed a “reproach against excessive rationality”. Quoting Gadamer, de Man goes on to specify that the historical backlash against allegory stemmed from the view that “as soon as its meaning is reached, [allegory] has run its full course.” (de Man, 188-189). This view is predicated on the idea that allegory’s real referent already constitutes a fixed or determined value. And yet what sets the “Third World” apart in Jameson’s discussion of allegory is the very idea that “nation” does not necessarily amount to a fixed or over-determined referent, a cul-de-sac at the end of every allegorical road, but is often an elusive meaning towards which allegory can only gesture. Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, speaking of what he calls regretfully a “Puertoricanization” of the Caribbean, elucidates the machinery of signification within a peculiarly Antillean context. For the Puerto Rican novelist, the great writers and artists of the Caribbean succeed in communicating a malaise (*modorra*) or “*taedium vitae*,” a post-colonial condition in which the soul is suspended in indecision, trapped between “a precarious past and an uncertain future,” and in which the subject is nostalgic for a tradition that is not entirely foreign but nor can be considered one’s own. (513) This condition of the “suspended self”, at once nostalgic and anticipatory, opens up the apparently closed-ended structure of allegorical signification in the Caribbean. What is surprising about the applicability of Rodríguez Juliá’s pessimistic prognosis to Cuba, though, is that Cuba has since the sixties been seen as *the* Caribbean nation which did in fact fully achieve a sense – and not only a status – of national sovereignty. Apparently this distinction is no longer applicable.

For reasons that I will explain presently, I believe in fact that allegory operates differently in the Cuban milieu than in the process described in Jameson’s essay. Allegory has often been the Cuban writer’s trope of choice to speak about the Castro regime; the problem is that the Castroist police have always been excellent readers of allegory! (Virgilio Piñera was persecuted by the authorities in the seventies for writing about a fake diamond which bore the name Delfi, correctly interpreted by the Authorities as an anagrammatic misspelling of Fidel.) The photograph on the cover of Carlos Varela’s album *Como los peces* is clearly an allegory for the national situation; the image of Varela himself covering the top of a goblet containing a goldfish appears to be a commentary on a whole range of themes

associated with life on the island: solitude, insularity, suffocation, oppression, *bloqueo*. The fish, with its stunned, empty gaze seems to allegorize an outward-looking solitude and the emotional and physical trauma of Cubans living through the Special Period. Varela tells stories in his songs (rather than lyrical expressions) which are allegorical; that is, while they may narrate a story about a particular individual, they also refer to something else which is more or less explicit and specific. A song from *Como los peces*, “La política no cabe en la azucarera” (“Politics doesn’t belong in the sugar dish”) strings together a series of images which are also unequivocally allegorical. The song opens with the verses, “un amigo se compró un Chevrolet del ‘59. No quiso cambiar algunas piezas, y ahora no se mueve.” (“A friend bought a ‘59 Chevy. He didn’t change the parts and now it doesn’t run.”) It’s nothing out of the ordinary to see a ‘59 Chevy in Havana, and certainly just as common to find the vehicle immobilized due to lack of replacement parts. And yet this anecdote refers to something beyond the fact that a friend bought a car. That the car is dated as a “‘59” identifies it with the year of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution itself; and the fact that the car’s owner didn’t replace some of the necessary parts, leaving it atrophied, is evidently a commentary on the current state of the Cuban Revolution and its aging leaders. A simple chiasmatic inversion in the song highlights the allegorical function: Varela does not refer to “la Habana Vieja,” the proper term for the majestic colonial section of Havana; he instead inverts the term and sings of “La Vieja Habana,” thereby emphasizing the fact – so often lamented in the nineties – that the once-heralded “Paris of the Caribbean” is now just old, neglected, and crumbling.

The allegorical function in Varela’s songs is fairly clear. And under “normal” “Third-World” circumstances, the national allegory thesis – that the story of the private individual in fact refers to the situation of the embattled nation – presupposes a hermeneutic, the intervention of the critic who must unveil the allegorical structure and bring to the light of day the *real* reference of the narrative. (Think of Jameson’s own readings of Ousmane Sembene, Galdós and Lu Xun.) In Varela’s song lyrics, the presence of allegory, contrary to a hidden or concealed structure, can at times be something rather direct and even heavy-handed. In Cuba allegory seems to almost parallel the state itself as an imposing umbrella that tends to con(s)train the meaning of the work of art. For both the artist and the critic there seems to exist at the present time a certain inevitability of allegory in Cuban culture.

An apparent counter-example of this allegorical inevitability in the Cuba Special Period might be Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*. It is interesting to compare the narrative projects of Zoé Valdés and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. Despite the many striking similarities between these two writers, the differences between them are in a way even more noteworthy.

Both were journalists before turning to literature, and both seem to write about similar topics – life during the Special Period in all its squalor – with the journalist’s ear for local color and parlance. But certainly the most noteworthy and discussed similarity between these two contemporary Cuban writers is the predominance of graphic sexuality in their prose.

Sex is a good starting point for discussing a seemingly defiant anti-allegorical quality in Gutiérrez’s *Trilogía*. In an almost maddeningly repetitious series of vignettes and short stories written from 1995-1997 that narrate a perpetual present, an ongoing quest for sex, marijuana and alcohol (Gutiérrez’s holy triumvirate), it is no surprise that sex is more evocative of excrement than elevated sentiment. After two years in prison for God-knows-what peccadillo, either selling frozen lobsters on the black market or “escorting” elderly European women around Havana, Pedro Juan (as the narrator refers to himself) returns to his room and makes love to his girlfriend, Isabel. It is the one moment in the *Trilogía* in which sex is nuanced with a suggestion of pathos:

Cerré la puerta. Nos desnudamos despacio. Nos abrazamos y nos besamos. ... El corazón se me aceleró y casi se me sale una lágrima. Pero la contuve. No puedo llorar delante de esta cabrona. La penetré muy despacio, acariciándola, y ya estaba húmeda y deliciosa. Es igual que entrar en el paraíso. Pero tampoco se lo dije. Es mejor quererla a mi manera, en silencio, sin que ella lo sepa. (294)

I closed the door. We undressed slowly. We embraced and kissed. My heartbeat accelerated and I almost shed a tear. But I held it back. I can’t let myself cry in front of that bitch. I penetrated her slowly, caressing her, and she was already wet and delicious. It’s like entering paradise. But I didn’t tell her. It’s better to love her in my own fashion, in silence, without her knowing.

Even here, the closest Gutiérrez comes in the *Trilogía* to experiencing tenderness, the tear is held back; the kind word to the lover goes unsaid. Pedro Juan’s solution to surviving Cuba’s Special Period is not a brotherhood of shared travails, but rather bodily release, non-communication, anesthetization. I characterize this kind of writing as, on the surface at least, anti-allegorical, because Pedro Juan attempts to suppress the signifying transcendence of objects and activities, in fact expends great energy to limit the meaning of episodes to their sole, monadic occurrence. The continual quest for marijuana and alcohol and their attendant anesthetization might be seen as the agents which deaden the signifying – allegorical or otherwise – capacity of Gutiérrez’s vignettes.

With its emphasis on the body’s nether regions and the exchange of its fluids, it might be tempting to assign the *Trilogía* to the realm of the grotesque. Further impetus to do so can be found in Pedro Juan’s repeated

disdain for expressions of high or rarified culture. He contrasts the “popular” nature of the books he reads to his girlfriend’s elite literary taste. He boasts of never having to concern himself with the artifice of “good writing”, and certainly Gutiérrez’s choppy, brutally blunt style is anti-Cuban baroque (and therefore anti-elite) in the extreme. And yet, Rabelais enthusiasts would be, in the final analysis, hard pressed to demonstrate that the abundance of intoxication, copulation, and defecation in the novel – activities often signaling the presence of the grotesque – belong to the realm of a social body in which communal values prevail. Two sentences from the authority on this subject is enough to cast doubt on the *Trilogía*’s pertaining to the realm of the grotesque: “In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people” (Bakhtin 19). To the contrary, the emphasis on the body – sexuality, excrement, urine, odor, intoxication, and hunger – in *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* seems to highlight Pedro Juan’s radical solitude and isolation: “Y no es que uno elija estar solo. Es que poco a poco, uno se queda solo. Y no hay remedio. Hay que resistir” (“One doesn’t choose to be alone. But little by little one ends up alone. And there’s no solution. You have to struggle.” 82). And yet paradoxically it is also precisely here where we can pinpoint the text’s allegorical function. Pedro Juan is not so much a carnival prankster fostering a rowdy fraternal ambience but rather is more akin to a picaresque hero whose misfortunes result from attempting to survive in a hostile society. This unforgiving social system of the *Trilogía*, in which all of the habitants, apparently without exception, are isolated and monadic picaresque personages, is none other than the brutal form of Cuban capitalism in the Special Period, and the allegorical thrust resides precisely in the transformation of Cuban society into this capitalistic jungle, in which only those with access to dollars survive.

One telling episode narrates Pedro Juan *jineteando*, or “escorting” an older European tourist. In exchange for company and sexual services, Pedro Juan is well compensated. And yet Havana is teeming with qualified competitors for such a highly-coveted position. In order to minimize his formidable competition in this enterprise, Pedro Juan mendaciously confirms the rumors his client has heard about black men, namely that they are violent and abusive. We are squarely within the world of capitalism here, and perhaps the greatest irony of all about *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* is that it can be read, in its wrenching depiction of the Cuban transition to controlled capitalism, as a socialist novel. This transition is denounced allegorically, since each subsequent episode is emblematic of this brave new world of the Special Period.

I would like to conclude this reflection on allegory in the Special Period with a discussion of a cultural product that reveals as well as any the

conditions of life in Cuba during the late nineties. I am thinking of the remarkable film, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* (*Who the Hell is Juliette* 1997) by the Mexican director Carlos Marcovich. At first glance, Marcovich's film is in bold defiance of Jameson's assertion about the inevitable allegorical function of third-world art. Filmed in a documentary style, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* seems to relegate the story's setting, Cuba of the 90s, to the background, almost as though it were a backdrop of normalcy – just another developing country – against which the story of two individuals can unfold. Marcovich brackets or suspends political considerations in an attempt to explore the mysterious connection – based on resemblance, attraction, envy, and love – between two women who apparently have nothing in common, the Cuban teenager Juliette and her Mexican counterpart, the model Fabiola. The most important link between Juliette and Fabiola is not their condition as “third-world women” as the allegorists would have it, nor the striking physical resemblance between them: rather, what connects the two women is the psychological effects of abandonment stemming from the absence of the father. Hence the private or subjective, the individual or psychological, is seemingly the real focal point of the story, while the background or setting is apparently interchangeable, secondary.

If de Man characterizes symbol (in opposition to allegory) as a trope which appeals to a sense of universality, to a non-exhaustive signifying capacity (188) then *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* operates, on the surface at least, within a symbolic mode rather than allegorical, insofar as the connection between Juliette and Fabiola appears to be something mysterious and universal, an attraction or spirit that transcends the limitations of context. But it soon becomes clear in the film that the social conditions of life in Juliette's Cuba are in fact too determinant to be separated out from the story of the individual. In the case of the Mexican Fabiola, her father's absence is explained by her mother, who identifies the father as a fleeting lover with green eyes. But the departure of Juliette's father is part of the political saga of the Cuban diaspora that has scarred millions of families. Juliette's mother, we are told, committed suicide by setting herself on fire, *se metió candela*,” (a reminder of the reportedly astonishing rates of suicide among women in Cuba during the Special Period)⁶ and Juliette herself is caught in the tragic cycle of Cuban *jineterismo*, in which the primary source of her livelihood are the foreign, mostly Italian “boyfriends” who are tourists on the island.

But the charade of separating out the story of the individual from her social setting is entirely exploded, in a brief but telling scene in which Juliette is asked to give her opinion of Cuba's president. Her nervous response, as she looks around in a paranoid fashion, is covered over by the background music. (Contrast this muted speech, which speaks volumes, to the scream of the exiled artist like Reinaldo Arenas or Zoé Valdés.)

Juliette's silenced opinion of Cuba's president reveals the artificiality, or if you will, the ideology of this crack or dividing line between content and setting.

Though this essay has discussed a wide array of cultural production, it is certainly nothing like an exhaustive catalogue. Other writers' and artists' works are worthy of inclusion, such as the photographs of Miguel Piña, the detective novels of Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Daniel Chavarria, or the postmodern poetics in Abilio Estevez's *Tuyo es el reino* (*Thine is the Kingdom*), or the remarkable success of the albums produced by the musicians forming the group "Buena Vista Social Club" and the film of the same title by Wim Wenders. And yet even an in-depth examination of these works, too, I believe, would contribute to what seems like an unavoidable conclusion about the cultural production of the Cuban Special Period. For the time being at least, the story of the ordinary "Cuban" cannot avoid taking on the allegorical dimension of the story of the embattled nation itself.

NOTES

1 Each decade of the Revolution seems to have a life of its own: the optimistic sixties were emphatically concluded with the Padilla Affair; the seventies ended with storming of the Peruvian Embassy and Mariel debacle in 1980, in which 125,000 Cubans emigrated to South Florida in only a few weeks. The end of the eighties were marked by the execution of General Arnaldo Ochoa, one of the Republic's most beloved heroes, in 1989, accused of narco-trafficking. We might go so far as to say that the Elián González affair marked symbolically the end of the nineties and the beginning of our present decade; and the victorious denouement for the regime of the Elián saga symbolizes precisely its tenacious survival.

2 And even before. Think of Gertrudis de Avellaneda's poem, "Al Partir": "¡Adios patria feliz, Edén querido! / ¡Doquier que el hado en su furor me impela, / tu dulce nombre halagará mi oído", or Martí's verses, "Dos patrias tengo yo: Cuba y la noche".

3 No doubt that *Buena Vista Social Club* also expresses this rarified nostalgia, "the reunion of a musical group that never existed."

4 Aijaz, Ahmad's critique of the Jameson's essay is particularly effective.

5 For a genealogical discussion of the historical vicissitudes of allegory, see Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," 187-208.

6 See both Montaner and Alberto.