

Commitment Trouble: Gender Performances and Poetic Dissent in the Cuban Revolution

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ABSTRACT: In 1966, under the patronage of the Cuban Communist Party, the first official poets of the Cuban Revolution founded a journal entitled *The Bearded Caiman*. This 'beard' was a reference to the beards often maintained by former Revolutionary fighters in remembrance of combat, which had become a revolutionary insignia which merged masculine identity with political identity. Starting in 1966, these young, smooth-faced poets brandished their discursive beards as one would have displayed a red star. Yet, to what extent did their virile displays amount to political displays? How was the "new man", ushered in by political leaders, supposed to articulate gender and political commitment? And how should excessive, borderline parodic gender performances in these texts be interpreted? To answer these questions, we must first examine the political and gendered dictates weighing on the official poets, as well as on the whole literary field. We must thus consider their gender performance, in their texts and in their social performances, as the deliberate casting of a doubt over their political commitment. Could the object of the parody be the revolutionary subject rather than the gendered subject?

KEY WORDS: Gender performance, Cuban Revolution, poetic dissidence, gender parody, official poets.

"We can try to graft the elm tree so that it will grow pears but at the same time we must plant pear trees." In 1965, six years after the Revolutionary triumph, Ernesto Guevara's botanical metaphor invited Cuban leaders to promote a new revolutionary identity: a "new man", whom Guevara described in the essay *Socialism and Man in Cuba* as "freed from all the defects of the past". As the main topic of Guevara's text, art was meant to be a privileged avenue to the emergence of this new political identity. However, at the time Guevara's essay was published, institutionally or aesthetically dominant artists and writers were already in their thirties, and their poetic and political identities had thus been shaped before the Revolution. To Guevara, they were the elms that would never grow real pears. Indeed, he referred to them as "intellectual and artists [...] marked by the stigmata of bourgeoisie". The "new man" Guevara wished for when he published his essay did not correspond to any pre-existing identity in the literary and intellectual field. This unavailability explains his appeal to the Cuban Communist Party in this essay: "there are no artists of great authority who also have great revolutionary authority. The members of the party must take this task in hand."

Yet, because of its author's political legitimacy (as a military commander, the Minister of Industries and the director of the National Bank), because of its focus on art and culture and lastly because of its rapid, mass diffusion in Latin American press, *Socialism and Man in Cuba* had immediate and concrete repercussions on the Cuban cultural spheres. The Cuban Communist Party's reaction to Guevara's entreaty was immediate: a few months after the essay was published, the CCP conducted a search for prospective official poets among young writers. In January 1966, the Young Communist

League (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas, UJC) leadership reached out to Jesús Díaz, a twenty-year-old writer to whom a recognized collection of short stories and a position of Professor of Marxism in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Havana conferred both literary and political legitimacy.

Because of this legitimacy as well as his personal ties to the leaders of the UJC, Díaz was tasked with constituting a team of revolutionary young writers, in his age group, who would contribute to a monthly cultural, literary, artistic and political publication under his leadership. This publication was to be nothing less than the cultural supplement to the UJC newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* (*Rebel Youth*) and as such, more than fifty copies would be distributed across the country under the seal of the Communist Party. For these young poets who had yet to publish anything significant, this journal represented a significant literary launching pad. Most of them had not been published at all, and were still cutting their teeth in the Hermano Saíz Brigade, the military appellation given to the Cuban Writers' Union youth workshop, who met every Saturday afternoon in a great colonial building in the center of Havana.

The first issue of *El Caimán Barbudo* (*The Bearded Caiman*) was published in March 1966, and was prefaced with the group's poetic manifesto entitled "Nos pronunciamos" ("We declare"). The first paragraph of the manifesto highlighted the group's age as basis for political legitimacy: "It is not chance that brings us together. The Revolution did not happen upon us as it happened upon people shaped on its edges: the struggle and victory of the Revolution lasted thirteen years of our lives—undoubtedly the most important years. In consequence, we cannot be people who simply lend or refuse to adapt their voices to the Revolution. We took shape—and we

continue to be shaped—alongside it and, without it, we could not state our Selves.” (Caimán barbudo, 1966: 11).

Concordant with Guevara’s text, their revolutionary commitment was naturalized by the performance of their young age, which establishes a continuity with the Revolution presented as independent from the poets’ will—throughout the text, their commitment shifts from a political opinion to a political identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), her study of social productions (especially discursive productions) of gender, Butler defines “performance” as the heart of the discursive processes by which social constructs are naturalized. One of the challenges of this research is the identification of a body of discursive devices in the constructs of gender identities and dominant political identities.

These young poets’ commitment to the ideals of the Revolution—naturalized in their manifesto—clearly shows from the start, in the symbolic name of their publication, which Cuban readers would not have missed: the ‘caiman’ referred to the shape of the island and the ‘beard’ to those of the *guerrilleros* returning from the Sierra after the victory of the Revolution, which most of them had kept as an emblem of battle. Beyond the nationalist and revolutionary political symbolism, the virility implied by this title, *The Bearded Caiman*, is striking: the aggressive crocodile’s enormous jaw is emphasized by its beard, which constitutes a traditional representation of the masculine gender.

These official poets’ insistence on virility was not simply coincidental to either their group’s poetic identity or to the nature of the Revolution’s new man. Indeed, the Bearded Caimans were all white, publicly heterosexual men. Here, ‘publicly heterosexual’ refers to their publicly displaying their heterosexuality as part of their literary identity, in writing or in social settings, and to their public lives as opposed to their private practices which, based on the interviews I conducted with the surviving half of the group, seemed less exclusively heterosexual. This identity chosen by the CCP-sanctioned poets to embody and promote Guevara’s “new man” can thus be examined through the lenses of its social performance and of its sociological characteristics.

Excluding the idea that criteria of gender, race and sexuality were mechanically or explicitly applied at the time of the group’s formation, or that their identity choice could have been influenced by political factors (such as network sociology or connivance), an important element of context must be understood. In 1965, when *Socialism and Man in Cuba* was published, there already existed a group of poets in their early twenties, established around the *El Puente*, an independent publisher. This group was made up of heterosexual and homosexual (some infamously so), white, mixed-race and black men and women who, remarkably, had already started a process of institutionalization. Indeed, in 1964, Nicolás Guillén, the most prominent man of letters in Cuba due to his poetic renown and his leadership of the National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba, had granted the group his support and his help in distributing the poets’ books. This endorsement by the main national literary insti-

tion, although not an offer of publication, gave these writers a literary legitimacy, in addition to the political legitimacy theoretically conferred by their young age, according to the Caimans’ rhetoric of age as naturalization. However, in 1965, the Cuban state shut down *El Puente* and persecuted some of its members.

In light of the Caimans’ ulterior sponsorship by the state, it is reasonable to enquire why *El Puente*’s poets, who were young enough to become the new men, were set aside while another group was created from scratch just a few months later. How were the two groups’ fundamentally different sociological make ups and relations to gender and sexuality compared and judged with regards to the creation of a new man?

Without archives allowing a clear insight into the internal debates of the Communist Party on the dissolution of *El Puente* and the later creation of the *Bearded Caiman*, the worldview which guided their decisions can be recreated through marking texts from Cuban political leaders, among which *Socialism and Man in Cuba*. Here, the term “worldview” must be understood as it was theorized by Lucien Goldman, as a transindividual construction, deriving from a group rather than from a single individual, whose subjects are relatively aware of (Goldman, 1970).

The first section will analyze the gendered dimension in this new revolutionary political identity called the “new man” and scrutinize the specific literary translation of a blend of political identity and virile identity, operating through the naturalization process. This first step in reflection will be followed by a discussion on the Bearded Caimans’ appropriation and performance of this political identity in their productions of the 1960s, in a corpus of ten collections published between 1966 and 1970. The second section will focus on the Caimans’ literary productions over the years 1971-1991, which are a meaningful period for the construction of the Cuban literary field and particularly for the history of *The Bearded Caiman*.

The year 1971 was the start date of the period known today as the “Gray Quinquennium”, a phrase coined by literary critic Ambrosio Fornet to describe an era of severe censorship lasting until 1975 (or longer, according to some critics). In 1991, the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s main political and economic ally, marked the start of the “Special Period”, an economic crisis of unprecedented scale in the history of the Revolution. This change of economic and political conjecture deeply altered some writers’ and intellectuals’ stances, amongst whom two Bearded Caimans: Jesús Díaz, the founder of the *Bearded Caiman*, went into exile in Spain in 1991; Raúl Rivero, after a period of imprisonment in Cuba, was exiled to Madrid where he joined the ranks of anti-Castro activists. These altered political affiliations had a measurable impact on their productions, which became regulated differently than the rest of the Cuban literary field.

In the history of the Bearded Caimans, the year 1970-1971 marked the completion of a process of rupture with the regime. Several members were thus summoned in court, including Guillermo R. Rivera, the editor-in-chief, whose poem “The Poet and the Minister”

was found too critical. But the group's ostracism had started earlier in 1967, when the CCP removed the journal from them after years of praise and placed it under the control of a more docile editorial board. What had happened? One answer stems from structural and historical factors: in the late 1960s, an increasing shutdown of the literary field could be observed, partly the nationalization of all the printing presses in 1967. Another answer, as important if not more so than the first, comes from the Bearded Caimans' actual literary and political position. Acting in their official capacity, they claimed taking a critical stance was necessary, which took the form of "scalpel criticism" in their journal. Critical adherence was still defensible in the 1960s as several Marxist traditions coexisted before the Soviet version of Marxist-Leninism dominated the Cuban political and cultural fields.

The Caimans' political stance, combining non-dogmatic commitment and non-dissident critique, found an original literary translation in their works. Their personal aesthetic is the subject of my ongoing doctoral thesis, in which I theorize it under the name "playful suspicion". This phrase best conveys the effect these texts produced on the reader: a doubt, more precisely a suspicion, which could not lead to an accusation of dissidence, nor completely disappear after repeated declarations of adherence. For example, when shots were fired from the Guantanamo base in spring 1966, killing a Cuban soldier, a series of poems served as the Caimans' response in the following *Bearded Caiman* issue 'Alerta'. Iván Gerardo Campañoni's provocatively-toned poem "What is Happening?" defied, provoked and insulted the Americans in manner so excessive as to make the reader doubt the reality and sincerity of the poetic subject's commitment. The discredit generated by hyperbole is precisely one of the devices of subversive parody defined by Judith Butler, which will be further developed.

Yet, the start of the Gray Quinquennium censorship in 1971 affected the Caimans too and this 'playful suspicion' aesthetic³ started disappearing from their political poems: collections dated after 1971 featured many serious, sometimes solemn political poems (on Che Guevara, the Vietnam war, Cuban history, etc.) with no trace of their earlier ambiguity. Nevertheless, this playful suspicion did not vanish from their entire production. In fact, it was transferred to different types of poems, whose productions increased in their books and which staged erotic stories perceived through a male, heterosexual subjectivity. Their writing of suspicion had thus shifted from the realm of political representations to that of sexual and gendered representations.

Indeed, statistically, in the ten collections published by the group between 1966 and 1970, a quarter on average was allocated to political games, while erotic games represented only 10% of the total.² However, between 1971 and 1991, there was a marked decrease in political games in the group's nineteen collections, down to 7% of the whole, while erotic games increased to 20% and in some cases half of these productions. This was the case for two of the group's most consecrated writers' productions, Victor Casaús'

Loving without Papers (Amar sin papeles) and Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera's *In the Very Flesh (En Carne propia)*.

The shift from the political realm to the erotic realm can also be perceived in the evolution of the titles of the collections, those of Victor Casaús or Raúl Rivero which went from *Man's Role* to *A Heart to Give*. What was the meaning of this shift? Instead of simply abandoning the playful aesthetic in a period of strong censorship, why was it displaced and confined to erotic poems staging sexual and gender identities? Did these poems of the 1970's and 1980's retain a politically subversive dimension? Had questions of gender become sanctuary for ideological struggles in this period of political censorship? The second section will propose an answer to these questions by developing the hypothesis that it was the revolutionary political identity itself that was jeopardized by the parodic poems, beyond gender identities.

1. The 'New Man': a new identity blurring virility and revolutionary commitment

The construction of this identity was first produced in *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, considered referential as a primary text and because of its reception. The capitalization of "Hombre" in the original title might suggest that Guevara's "New Man" extended to women. However, all forty instances of the word "man" in the text are in lower case and the word "woman" occurs only once, prompting a dismissal this first idea.

Moreover, this lexical disproportionality finds its counterpart in the linguistic representations of masculine and feminine genders: every political authority mentioned in the text is male, the activities praised for their revolutionary quality imply some physical strength (sugar cane workers, fighters, guerrilleros) and women are erased from Guevara's succinct account of the Cuban Revolution in the beginning of the essay. In his speech, the attack on the Moncada Barracks which triggered the Revolution on July 26, 1953, are attributed to only "Fidel's men". Yet, two women, Melba Hernández and Haydée Santamaría, had been involved in these attacks and had later become famous in the political landscape. In this historical introduction to *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, a long section was dedicated to the guerrilleros, described by Guevara as "heroic fighters" without whom the Revolution would not have succeeded, thus undermining the role and action of women. They were paramount to the victory, acting as clandestine nurses, information smugglers and fighters. Autonomous female fighters had gathered together in the women-only Mariana Grajales battalion, whose creation in September 1959 had caused heated debates amongst Fidel Castro's men. Gender conflicts and women's specific role in this history were erased from the "New Man's" virile identity. Still, when Guevara's essay was published, women's inclusion in this identity was plausible, so long as they took part in activities requiring physical strength so that the so-called weaker sex build their strength.

Nevertheless, the only appearance of the word "woman" in the

text seems to imply their exclusion from this “New Man’s” identity. After developing the idea of sacrifice as necessary to the progress of the Revolution, Guevara praised: “the leaders of the revolution have children who do not learn to call their father with their first faltering words; they have wives (“mujeres”, women) who must take part in the general sacrificing of their lives to carry the Revolution to its destination”. First, the possessive verb linking the man to his children and his women (plural) indicates an asymmetrical relationship between men and women. Second, this representation contributes to setting heterosexuality as the norm. Third, the plural form of the single occurrence of “women” can be contrasted to the word “man”, which, conversely, is almost exclusively employed in the singular, as an idealized and homogeneous construct.

Amongst Guevarist moral dictates—political efficiency, acceptance of a profoundly weakened economy, electricity-saving campaigns—sacrifice was mostly imposed on women and especially on their sexuality. The press show many examples of this, as listed in Lillian Guerra’s *Vision of Power*. For example, during the 1970 sugar cane harvest, as the whole country was mobilized to satisfy the soviet order, young women were asked to postpone their weddings so that they would be free to work in the fields. Popular feminine characters embodied this injunction to sacrifice their sexual life, like “Cusa”, the ideal woman found in the cultural supplement to *Granma*, the Cuban Communist Party’s daily newspaper (Guerra, 2012: 242). Drawings of Cusa thus depicted the “ideal woman’s” daily life: greeting her children from school and helping them with their homework, then greeting her husband from work and serving him dinner, and once he has eaten his fill, refusing his sexual advances and instead going to the neighborhood Committee for the Defense of the Revolution to fulfill collaborative tasks.³

Dictates imposed on revolutionary men were founded on their relationship to women, and generally by opposition to them. These dictates could be very practical, even when they originated from the highest echelons of the state. In 1963, in a speech given on the anniversary of the Moncada Barracks attack, on the very day of the anniversary of the Revolution, Fidel Castro accused men of wearing skin-tight trousers “like Elvis Presley”, calling them “effeminate anti-revolutionaries” (Castro, 1968). In interviews, the Bearded Caimans discussed how they were stalked by the Vice squad because of their tight pants and long hair. A poem in the collection *Permission to Speak (Permiso para hablar)*, published in 1969 by the Caiman José Yanes, portrayed a policeman measuring the width of a man’s trousers by dropping an orange down the waistband and retrieving it from the bottom of the trouser leg. Punishment for those who departed from these gender dictates were much harsher than this poetic anecdote. In 1965, the Health Minister declared that homosexuals (or “effeminate”, an identity that conflated gender, sexuality and politics) were naturally vulnerable to imperialist propaganda. This led to the creation of the Military Units to Aid Production (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción): work camps where homosexuals were sent to be toughened up.

The Caimans’ famous “game of gallantries” must thus be understood in this sociopolitical context. The Bearded Caimans livened up their evenings at the ice-cream shop Coppelias, in the city center of Havana, where they staged playful collective performances of gender. Men competed to compose the best compliment to present to nearby women. These compliments were then judged based on their effectiveness on their recipients. This game—a genuine performance of masculinity and heterosexuality—possessed a dimension of legitimation at a time when the journal was regularly inspected to verify no homosexual authors were being published, as that was formally forbidden by the direction of the UJC.

Indeed, gender dictates were reflected in the literary field as well as the political field. All key positions in the literary world were held by men: they controlled every institution and national publisher, as well as the three biggest literary journals in the country. In the political field, the Central Party Committee comprised only 6% of women and the National Committee of the Union of Communist Youth only one of the 27 seats.

The political and literary consistency had repercussions from an aesthetic point of view: the idea of the “New Man” found its counterpart in a “common man” constructed as the privileged poetic subject and recipient, as in the title of Domingo Alfonso’s successful collection *Poems of the Common Man (Poemas del hombre común)*: several poems centered around a fighter or a worker as the central poetic subject or object. However, this interpretation of the “New Man” by the poets of the 1950’s—the Caimans’ predecessors—who had been the object of Guevara’s criticism—interpretation was largely imperfect. In *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, Guevara valued the New Man’s exceptional, avant-gardist qualities, rather than his ordinariness.

Did the young, official poets of the *Bearded Caiman* give a literary embodiment to this Revolutionary virile identity? Did their poems participate in its construction and in its political naturalization? A key corpus of their 1960’s production characterized by a common connection with the theme of childhood provides an answer to these questions. This corpus is where the genesis of the Revolutionary subject, as performed in the Caimans’ poetry, was developed in its most definitive form. Two poems drawn from Luis Rogelio Noguera’s, the most celebrated Caiman’s, collection *Carrot Top (Cabeza de Zanahoria)* are most compelling here, the first of section of the collection being exclusively devoted to childhood. This collection, published in 1967, received the first ever David Award, an award given to young writers by the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba. The first poem, entitled “Poem” (“Poema”), superimposes a child’s slumber and dreams with the landing of the ship *El Granma*, which Fidel Castro and his 81 guerilleros boarded from Mexico to Cuba in 1956. The first two quatrains recount the child’s brutal, troubling awakening and his return to a dreamy sleep. The final tercet recounts the *Granma*’s landing and by metonymy Fidel Castro’s arrival.

POEMA

*Me despertaron aquella mañana a las seis.
Había ruido, gritos, fui
cerrando de nuevo los ojos hasta quedarme
profundamente dormido.*

*Soñé que dios bajaba
caramelos hasta moradas de los árboles
del parque,
que tenía un camioncito nuevo.*

*En el golfo,
el "Granma" avanzaba
rajando la niebla.*

These eleven lines show elements of naturalization of the author's political commitment. The major axis of the poem is the almost magical chronological concurrence of the child's dreams, which transform Fidel Castro into a god who provides him with gifts and candy.

The second poem, called "A life on Línea" ("Viviendo en línea") (Nogueras, 1967: 29), is emblematic of the other texts of this childhood-themed section. Línea is one of the main roads of Havana, which halves the district of Vedado in two. Without excessive interpretation, the rectilinear parallels between the title and the worldview in which the poem participated is amusing.

*Marta y yo
en las puertas mismas de la infancia
intercambiamos bicicletas,
besos clandestinos en los parques,
abrazos en los rincones más oscuros.*

*Marta, secreto de los pájaros,
dulce sabor del helado,
y yo,
llenamos la casa de sonrisas y suspiros,
aquella tarde en que la abuela estuvo tan enferma.*

While childhood was the time for the oneiric absorption of the revolutionary struggle in "poem", here it is the opportunity for the first heterosexual practices. They meaningfully take place "at the gates of childhood" and they are both a natural impulsion linked to childhood and a rite of passage from childhood into adulthood. While the male poetic subject is still entangled in childhood, Marta grapples with the animal world; in the sixth line, the apposition "Marta, secret of the doves" reveals that she knows its secrets. Incidentally, she is the only figure to be characterized, whereas the poetic subject stands on his own as when he occupies an entire line with "and I", after two lines qualifying Marta, particularly

with the taste of ice cream. To echo the title of the introduction to the French *Encyclopédie critique du genre*, the young girl is the sole bearer of flesh in the erotic social rapport.⁴ The young girl as well as the grandmother are characterized by the word "sick" in the end of the poem, which implies the degeneration of their flesh.

These two poems, drawn from a collection consecrated by the institutions and emblematic of the official poetry of the 1960's, showed the poetic manufacture and naturalization—markedly through the theme of childhood—of a masculine, virile and heterosexual revolutionary identity. What would become of the political and gendered identity they produced in their texts once they ceased to be official poems and became subjected to censorship?

2. Poetically troubling gender: the authors disrupting the dominant political identity

The nineteen collections published between 1971 and 1991 showed a resurgence of poems staging the poetic subject's heterosexual masculinity in strongly stereotypically and asymmetrically gendered relationships. This type of poems makes up between a fourth to a half of Nogueras', Raúl Rivero's, Guillermo R. Rivera's and Victor Casaús' works.

These collections from the period after 1971 display a new type of composition: binary structures. One autonomous section contains serious political poems on figures of the revolutionary pantheon or on glorious episodes of its history, and another section contains erotic poems on gender relationships. This division, however, does not always set the two elements on the same level. In the erotic poems, the tone is more mundane, almost familiar; the lines decrease in length compared to the political poems, down to fewer than seven syllables, which is typically an attribute of minor art in classical Spanish metric.

These two sections are united by transitional poems, such as the fittingly titled "Minor Art" in Nogueras' *Fifteen Thousand Lives of the Walker* (*Las Quince Mil vidas del caminante*), which portrays a combatant returned to his home and finding a few moments of rest under "the most minor revolt of these lines" where the "great mass movements of history" cannot be seen (Nogueras, 1977: 85). The structure, metric and poetic mise-en-scène place the poem at the bottom of the poetic hierarchy and thus encourage the reader not to pay too close attention.

In a context of strong censorship, this minimizing strategy might be exactly why these poems must be examined more closely. After the Caimans' writing had constructed a gendered political identity, this sudden division between the erotic and the political must be questioned—all the more so as their playfulness withdrew into the former. Did this thematic division lead to a genuine insulation of these topics? Did the parodic processes found in the erotic poems influence the interpretation of the political poems? Answers to these new discursive strategies, which appear in the Caimans' 1970's texts may be found first in a corpus of poems which ques-

tion representations of the male gender (particularly through the use of hyperbolic processes) and in a second part, in a corpus which undermines the legitimacy of representations of the female gender, which are denounced as a dishonest literary construct.

These two strategies, hyperbolic ostentation and denunciation of an idealized construct, share parodic devices such as those over-viewed by Judith Butler in "From Parody to Politics", the conclusion to *Gender Trouble*. Butler underlined the potential for political action found in parodic gender performances: "There is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects." (Butler, 1990: 186). The political repercussions of these parodic poetic performances must thus be measure in the chosen corpi.

Butler's thought process is permeated with linguistics: the term 'parody' itself comes from the literary lexicon. But Butler's definition of 'parody' must not be imposed on these Cuban poets' writings. The literary term parody originates from the Greek *parodia* meaning a farcical imitation of a poetic song and is usually defined in literature as a text ridiculing another well-known ur-text. This connection to a preexisting model which is copied and transformed defines the parody in literature and thus in Butler's definition. However, while Butler recognizes the subversive power of parody through laughter, she does not formulate the necessity for the source model to be ridiculed. In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Gérard Genette creates a relevant differentiation between "parody", which does not degrade the model but transforms it with humor, and "travesty" which does degrade the model. These two devices seem able to coexist within Butler's broader definition of the parody. They are dispersed through the Caimans' texts, in the representations of the male gender that are so excessive as to seem like 'poor copies' and the representations of the female gender which are subjected to Genette's "travesty", appearing as the degraded version of the traditional idealized feminine representations. Metonymically, the parodic male is associated with a virile political identity, which gives this parody a subversive dimension. The female travesty similarly contains a subversive dimension in light of another gendered and political confusion created, in the same corpus, by the allegorical depiction of the Revolution as a female lover. Through the association with degraded feminine representations, is the Revolution as a whole travestied?

These poems repeatedly feature a relationship between a consistently male, heterosexual poetic subject and a woman who he abuses, giving her specious pretexts to gain her favors, deceiving her or her relatives with regards to his intentions. These often light and humorous texts transform a romantic, poetic love story into an amused parody. Nogueras is undoubtedly the biggest producer of this type of texts, with the peculiarity of often adding a meta-poetic dimension wherein the poetic subject is also an image of the poet writing his book. Two of Nogueras' poems seem to best represent these parodic textual practices. The first is called "Poetic Matter" ("Materia de poesía"), from the collection *Imitation of Life (Imitación*

de la vida), where the theme of copy appears as early as the title. This collection was published in 1981 and was rewarded by La Casa de las Américas which brought the collection on the international stage. The second poem is called "Workshop" ("Taller"), from the collection *Words Come Back (Las Palabras vuelven)* published post-humously in Cuba in 1994 (Nogueras, 2005: 331).

MATERIA DE POESÍA

*Qué importan los versos que escribiré después
ahora
cierra los ojos y bésame
carne de madrigal
deja que palpe el relámpago de tus piernas
para cuando tenga que evocarlas en el papel
cruza entera por mi garganta
entregame tus gritos voraces
tus sueños carniceros*

*Qué importan los versos donde fluirás intacta cuando par-
tas
ahora dame la húmeda certeza de que estamos vivos
ahora
posa intensamente desnuda
para el madrigal donde sin falta
floreceás mañana*

TALLER

*¿Qué es poesía?
Álzate la falda,
separa los muslos
(¡más!)
cierra los ojos
ya llego
.....
Esto...es...
¿oh?...¡oh!
es...toooohhhh
¿Viste?
Pero no se le vayas a decir a tus padres
ni a tus hermanos
difícilmente creerían niña
que se trata de un asunto
literario.*

These two poems contain similar structures: with a series of imperatives, the poetic subject gives sexual commands to a woman apparently young enough to be called "little one" in "Workshop" and falsely, coarsely expresses that he is driven by a literary purpose. These poems parody Petrarchan masculinity which shows a disin-

terest in the female body before elevating it to an ideal. However, the detachment from material, sexual pleasure is a element of both Petrarchan masculinity and Guevarist morals. The film *Soy Cuba*, for example, commissioned to soviet director Mikhail Kalatazov, was ostensibly censored because of its overly sexual representations. In the revolutionary morals appearing in the 1960's, sexual liberalism were associated with Batista's dictatorship, during which Americans would buy the bodies of young Cuban men and women.

Conversely, Noguerras' two poems assume that physical pleasure is the origin of the poetic text, in which pleasure is staged as the effect of man's domination on woman. The man gives orders, physically positions the woman's body, judges what is and is not important (as shown by the anaphor "no matter" in "Poetic Matter", he chooses what intellectual questionings to have and how to answer them ("what is poetry?"), he is the sole speaker, as the two texts are monologues, and *in fine*, he is the sole originator of the account of this adventure. In the context of the first Latin American country to have legalized abortion (in 1965), this mise-en-scène of a dominant heterosexual masculinity obsessed with physical pleasure to the point of foregoing his poetic duty might have appeared excessive and therefore ironic to a reader used to political speeches on gender equality (despite previous asymmetries in this discourse). This hyperbolic, caricatured poetic identity—which invades the whole sphere of the poem from gendered rapports to poetic rapports—pushes the reader to infer a hidden meaning. One of the comical devices of these poems is indeed doublespeak: the poetic subject addresses the parents and the woman. The reader is made complicit in this doublespeak and is thus shown the poetic subject as a usurper.

If the reader-narrator contract is undermined, can the reader still take the political poems found a few pages later at face value? For example, "Poetic Matter" follows a political adherence text entitled "Epoch". This poem announces the great anti-imperialist victories of the twentieth century and concludes triumphantly with the words "*Men, you are free, your wolves are dead*" (Noguerras, 1981: 150). But did reading "Poetic Matter" not push the reader to ask themselves *a posteriori* if this triumphant proclamation of freedom was similarly excessive and thus as illusory as this dominant virility? Exaggeration would here be sign of the artificial character of the poetic identity. Judith Butler catalogues this parodic device in the conclusion to *Gender Trouble*: "those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (Butler, 1990: 187). In this sense, the discursive beard, as a political and virile symbol, reveals itself to be a postiche beard in the Caimans' poetry of the 1970's.

The second aspect of gender parodies which are most closely related to travesty, as defined by Genette as parodies degrading the original model are the female representations found in the Bearded Caimans' 1970's and 1980's productions. An analysis of the construction of the female personification of the Revolution as the counterpart to the virile revolutionary identity is required to under-

stand the political incidence of the feminine travesty. The conflation of the Revolution with a woman as objects of the poet's love was recurrent in the collections of the second period, even in minor Caimans' works.

Félix Contreras, in a 1969 collection titled *Some Time (El Fulano tiempo)*, wrote an incendiary poem which fills out the entire page: "Woman, / you are not communism / but you look like it" (Contreras, 1969: 35). The comparison is brought further in Victor Casaús' poem "Contradictions", in his 1977 collection *Loving without Papers (Amar sin papeles)*, where the loved woman "burns like the night before a cataclysm and a revolution" (Casaús, 1977: 78). Noguerras' poem "like" examines the possible comparisons to describe the eyes of a female lover and finds the Revolution to be one of the few possibilities. Finally, in Raúl Rivero's work, the Revolution takes on an allegorical human form, specifically Rosa la Bayamesa's who was a heroin of the Independence War, showing her harvesting sugar cane surrounded by Lenin and other great revolutionary male figures. In these poems, the woman represented is generally distinguishable from the abused young women of the first corpus. The poetic assimilation to the Revolution in these later poems constructs a feminine ideal which embodies the greatest political idea.

However, simultaneously, other poems undermine this idealization. In many texts, the woman appears as a perpetual source of disappointment and bitterness for the male poetic subject, who feels deceived by a false representation. This feature is particularly recurrent in Guillermo R. Rivera's poems. In his 1983 collection *In the Very Flesh (En carne propia)*, two poems focus on Beatrice, the feminine ideal object of love sung about in Dante Alighieri's *New Life*. In a poem significantly titled "New Life" ("Vida nueva"), the poetic subject calls out to Dante by his last name "Alighieri", demonstrating a masculine and poetic complicity, and asks him to cease "jerk-ing him around"; the poetic subject then assures Dante he forgives him for everything apart for what he calls "the Beatrice affair". In "Private Beatrice" ("Beatriz privada"), the final poem of the collection *In the Very Flesh*, he stages the sorry effects of this literary deceit (Rivera, 1983: 49):

BEATRIZ PRIVADA

*¿Dónde está la mujer que yo buscaba,
aquella, de los primeros simples
versos de la infancia, o de los otros,
turbulentos, los versos de los veinte años,
cuando pensaba que todo lo sabía
y lo creaba?*

*He buscado en la sombra, en mis zapatos,
en el mar, en la noche y en la sangre.
He buscado ese nombre
con minuciosidad de sastre,
con el alma precisa de un notario.*

*Y ahora, después de tanto amor
sin encontrarla, pienso que todas
han sido esa mujer.
Cada una de ella dejó lo que podía
para mi sobrehumana mujer
inalcanzable.
Gracias, buenas muchachas.
Sólo que yo no estoy conforme,
sólo que yo no he terminado:
espero con cada nuevo día ese momento,
el momento en que surge otra vez,
en que vuelvo a engañarme;
el momento en que creo que aparece
temblando, entre el sol de la tarde.
El momento de volver a escribir:
Comienza la vida nueva*

In 1983, Guillermo R. Rivera had been the subject of censorship for seven years, and his poetry specifically for thirteen years—beneath this romantic bitterness, how can we not see a disappointment of another order? As in some texts this ideal woman is explicitly blurred with the Revolution, these processes of des-idealization can be interpreted beyond the scope of gender. Indeed, these artificial constructs may not be limited to literature.

Guillermo R. Rivera is not the sole Caiman to undertake this process of deconstructing the idealized feminine character. In Noguera's poem "Ulysses" ("Ulises"), in the *Fifteen Thousand Lives of the Walker* (*Las Quince mil vidas del caminante*) published in 1977, a woman disobeys the gender dictates while the masculine subject appears as the 'good student' in this Homeric school of the literary genre:

ULISES

*Todo estaba en regla:
me ausenté los años necesarios;
afrofé cíclopes y cantos de sirena;
regresé
y me reconoció el viejo*

*y fiel perro.
Pero tú, oh ingrata, tú que no has leído a Homero,
ni una puntada diste siquiera sobre el tapiz;
y ahora te encuentro,
cargada de hijos (medios hermanos de mi Telémaco)
llorando
porque acaba de dejarte
el primer pretendiente que llegó a tu puerta
no bien hube partido
hacia Troya.*

The woman depicted as unfaithful and as inadequate reader abandoned by her lovers appears as a degraded form of Homer's Penelope, who, here, breaks the promise of *Odysseus*. This parodic deconstruction of the norms ruling 'feminine' identity denounces this identity as an idealized and deceitful figure. From a certain point of view, this anti-idealist vein is coherent with Marxist materialist philosophy. However the degrading irony suggests a critique beyond a strictly Homeric sphere. Noguera's Penelope and Guillermo R. Rivera's Beatrice appear as two travesties of the personified Revolution.

In 1960's Cuba, a new revolutionary identity was promoted: the virile bearded man, an image which naturally excluded women. Through official speech, written propaganda and harsh punishments, such as the Military Camp for homosexuals, the early Revolution created a new political dictate based on an older gender dictate possibly derived from the colonial model of the conquistador. Later on, in the 1970's, after being censored, the poets of the *Bearded Caimans* parodied this gender identity in their poems. Circuitously, they thus managed to criticize the political identity associated with this gender identity. To reflect further, it may be interesting to consider the impact of the Spanish colonization and of American neo-colonialism on these revolutionary gender constructions. Indeed, to end on a Judith Butler quote, this proposed theorization of post-revolutionary Cuban poetic discourses should not contribute to construct a "'Third World' or even an 'Orient' in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism." (Butler, 1990: 6).

NOTES

¹I theorize this aesthetical notion in my doctoral dissertation as a literary device that creates and maintains doubt as to the Caimans' political commitment.

²The poems published in the review should be added to this number—these were usually allotted to political games.

³Lillian Guerra analyzed Cuban policy towards women through similar

examples. She finds it is not a true equality policy, but a policy granting women a central place in the construction of equality between men and homogenization of masculinities.

⁴The introduction is entitled: "The flesh of social rapports".

⁵For Butler, repetition possesses a constructive role in the definition of gender identities.

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