

THE CONSTRUCT OF CUBAN CULTURE: ENTRAPMENT  
AND FEMINIZATION OF 'THE ISLAND'

by

COLLIN DIRECTOR

A THESIS

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and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
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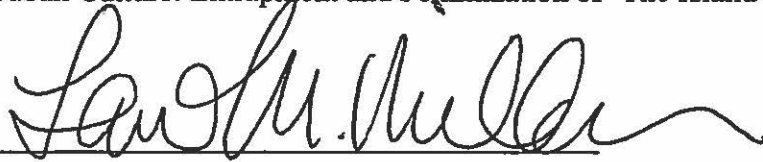
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## An Abstract of the Thesis of

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The purpose of this study is to understand further the culture that the Cuban writers of the Revolution endured, lived in, fled from, and contributed to. In order to achieve this goal I was able to assemble a canon of texts from authors of the revolution that could be categorized by their ideologies and perspective— either perverse to the Revolution and/or exiled. The four are poet Virgilio Piñera, playwright Antón Arrufat, and authors Edmundo Desnoes and Reinaldo Arenas. Close reading their works (respectively) “La Isla en Peso,” *Los siete contra Tebas*, *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, and *Antes Que Anochezca*, led to a discernable observation of their description of ‘the Island.’ The authors portray the Island as incarcerating, as well as incorporating a textual feminization of the Island.

Using Antonio Benítez Rojo’s *The Repeating Island* and Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* as theoretical lenses, I argue that the cultural underdevelopment and extreme censorship proves difficult in creating a national culture. The characterization of the Island is significant in concluding that this wave of writers created a platform for the next generation’s idea of a national culture by portraying the lack of space available throughout the censorship of the Revolution.

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## **Introduction: Historical and Cultural Aspects of the Cuban Revolution**

How does one react to change? How does one react to change in their surroundings? How does one react to a change in their surroundings that hinders their abilities to act? The Cuban authors of the middle of the twentieth-century have characterized in their writing a notion of culturally repressive forces, specifically as the Cuban Revolution commenced in 1959 on its way to a Communist state. This transition that began with an economic reform and various popular mobilizations to establish an egalitarian society, was led by a government that opposed anything against the Revolution (Chomsky, 44). The cultural limitations, culminating in the *quinquenio gris*—known as the longest and most extreme censorship in Cuban history (1971-1976)—, date back to the early stages following 1959. The assembly of the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC—National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba) in 1961 was a means to institutionalize cultural and intellectual expression (Tennant). The shift of the Revolution as declaredly socialistic and then communistic, with subsequent disillusionment in society after the changes had been made, created frustrations and tensions on the Island. The authors who grew up and matured with the Revolution portray in their works an insight of a perspective that suggest the emergence of a society that disabled the ability to freely express (Menton 124). In this research paper, it is my goal to apprehend these culturally defining forces in order to better understand the climate and trajectory of Cuban culture amidst the 1959 Revolution. In order to accomplish this task, I will be analyzing the works of Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979), Edmundo Desnoes (b. 1930), Antón Arrufat (b. 1935) and Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990). Divided into two sections, I have researched the portrayal of 1) The Island as

*entrapping*, and 2) A textual *feminization* of the Island; these two projections and characterizations of the Island permit an insight into the nature of the Island as restrictive, repetitive, patriarchal, penetrated by outside forces, that exudes an overarching theme of underdevelopment. By examining these two literary devices from the selected works, we are able to discern the continuities in Cuban literature that are consistent in this time-period of pre-and-post-revolution, while also delving into the different ways in which the authors project the Island to critique the existing state of the Island in a distinct way. The ability to compare and contrast passages from authors who published in a range spanning from 1943-1992 in their assessments of the state of the Island sheds a light into both critical and curious feelings towards the Revolution. This thesis will principally investigate how the authors selected portray the Island as entrapping and/or utilize a textual feminization of the Island to critique the lack of space (culturally), the underdevelopment, and the repetitive system that Cuba has been subjected to.

I will be utilizing Antonio Benítez Rojo's *The Repeating Island* and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* as theoretical lenses to approach the literary works with regards to their notion of a popular culture within the Island. Their theories will be applied to better interpret the nature of the Island – the dynamic between the individual and the systemic structure of society – that is explored textually by the authors who are critiquing elements that have stymied how and where culture could be developed. The concepts and philosophies approached in *The Practice of Everyday Life* explore simple, everyday practices (such as walking around a city, utilizing structures and recognizing signage) to subtly subvert the ways in which the individual

users/consumers in society are subject to the already established rules, governments, authorities and institutions (De Certeau xi). How do the users perceive their surroundings and how are their actions either reactive or impassive? De Certeau's examinations into these questions are particularly useful in analyzing the literary works as resistant, curious, or indifferent to the established rules and the transition of a Revolution. In Antonio Benítez Rojo's rereading of the Caribbean as a meta-archipelago in his book *The Repeating Island*, he investigates the cyclical and repetitive nature of "The Island." Although he argues for the similarities inherent throughout the Antillean Archipelago, he also focuses in on Cuba specifically as an exemplary display of an Island that has been exposed to the colonial "machine" and subsequent Plantation economy. The reason Benítez Rojo decides to emphasize "Plantation" with a capital is because of the ensuing consequences to a society that results from the existence of plantations on the Island:

For one: the singular feature of this machine is that it produced no fewer than ten million African slaves and thousands of coolies... All this, however, is not all: the plantation machines turned out mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism, African underdevelopment, Caribbean population; they produced imperialism, wars, colonial blocs, rebellions, repressions, sugar islands, runaway slave settlements, air and naval bases, revolutions of all sorts, and even a "free associated state" next to an unfree socialist state (Benítez Rojo 9).

The important thing to note is how Benítez Rojo utilizes the historical framework as an external and internal force on the Island that affects the outcome of society, and excites the discourse for his anthropological views of the development of culture in Cuba.

These two works and two theorists work together in that both Antonio Benítez Rojo and Michel de Certeau deal with the unfolding of a popular culture and the formation of a collective in relation to larger power structures. Both recognize the larger

establishments and overarching systems that factor into the characteristics of society; and both locate acts of resistance in cultural practices that are contrived via the faults and changes in institutional surveillance and control. The literary works examined in this thesis contain acts of critique, resistance, recognition, and curiosity of the existing and transitioning institutions and their affects on society and cultural development—thus, Michel de Certeau and Antonio Benítez Rojo prove key in discerning these distinctions, and ultimately analyzing the effect that these works have on the development of culture in Cuba.

In order to contextualize the texts we will analyze, it is essential to understand the history leading up to the Revolution. Dating back to the early 1500s, Cuba has always been at the center of a colonial agenda. The first conquests nearly eliminated the natives with Pedro Menéndez Avilés leading Spanish into the Caribbean with what Benítez Rojo describes as *la flota* (the fleet system), which was a series of “machines” that enabled extraction and distribution of goods in concordance with the Iberian Powers (Benítez Rojo 7). A predominant amount of the colonial attention was placed on México and Peru due to the larger landmass’ functionality for settlement, yet “the Caribbean was important strategically and geopolitically” due to the suitability of the region for cultivating agriculture (Chomsky 20). Simply put, the power of Spain was able to organize a systemic extraction and simultaneous colonization. As the global economy shifted throughout the nineteenth century with successive Latin American colonies gaining independence, Spain would eventually focus on Cuba as a vital asset because of their sugar production—culminating in the Plantation economy and society. For Benítez Rojo, the sugar economy has significant cultural effects in Cuba. A



component of his argument is that The Plantation produced a repetitive pattern, and extends itself further into neo-colonial times. Despite Cuban Independence after the defeat of Spain in the Spanish American War (1898), U.S. corporations and capitalist powers invested and situated themselves beneficially on the Island's cultivable and extractable land (Chomsky 33). In this moment that is signified by the signing of the Platt Amendment (1902) and the commencement of the Republican period in Cuba (1902-1959), the exploitation had been taken over by the United States. The Platt Amendment was part of a bill signed that allowed U.S. to maintain the right to intervene militarily in Cuba. U.S. influence and a wealth disparity in Cuba led to waves of corrupt governance and economic inequality— a duality that painted *campesinos* against the elite landowners that controlled forty-three percent of the country's income (Chomsky 33). Even through the Revolution, with an attempted agrarian reform in attempts to redistribute wealth, the sugar economy lived on in its Plantation form, affecting society. Benítez Rojo goes as far to say in his argumentation that whoever is in “power” will fall back on the sugar economy, which inherently brings about inequality. In the case of the literature written after the revolution, the texts examined suggest the authors belief that a critique of this new “power” would be ostracized and condemned as counter-revolutionary: in opposition of the goals of a communist revolution.

The canon of works I have selected to analyze were written by members of the first generation of authors to be writing during the revolution. The methodology of this research goes beyond the lens through which I have investigated the Cuban literature regarding Antonio Benítez Rojo's, *The Repeating Island*, and Michel de Certeau's, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The authors of the works selected are important to note as

falling under distinct categories: they are all either dissidents within the Revolution going against the congruencies of the establishment on the Island (self-described or as described by the state) and/or exiles. These two factors have led to a collection of literature that is critical and resistant of the Revolution, and a curiosity of the transition occurring. I will argue that these works are deliberate in interweaving their political and societal beliefs into the text. Crucial to the nature of the thesis, each work exemplifies characteristics that portray the Island as incarcerating and/or project a textual feminization of the Island. The poem “La Isla en Peso,” (Virgilio Piñera, 1943), the play *Los siete contra Tebas* (Antón Arrufat, 1968), the novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Edmundo Desnoes, 1965), and the autobiography *Antes Que Anochezca* (Reinaldo Arenas, 1992) contain different techniques, forms, and literary approaches.

Categorically, however, they can be compared as authors and works that have all fallen on the wrong side of the Revolution and its cultural changes. Virgilio Piñera was one generation of writers older than Arrufat, Desnoes, and Arenas, and thus acted as a trailblazer and mentor to the writers whom began to flourish during the Revolution. His poem “La Isla en Peso” was written in 1943 and thus precedes the post-revolution literature. However, as a writer who lived through the Gerardo Machado’s dictatorship and Fulgencio Batista’s subsequent regime, Piñera along with many other Cubans were hopeful of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano-Auténtico [Cuban Revolutionary Party-Auténtico ](PRC-A: 1944-1952) (Chichester 234). During this time of political reform, however, he was discontent with the “national culture” of Cuba that was struggling to depart from European influence to create a literature of their own. He understood well that “politics and literature are profoundly related and interconnected [and the writers of

the new generation] are in a privileged position to express the reality of life that boils around them” (qtd. In Chichester 242). This comment shows the path Piñera urged the new wave of Cuban writers to take. Although the critiques that we will examine from these authors take similar forms in instances, they are levied from different positions that take a stance on the Cuban culture. Piñera’s belief is set in the stagnation and cultural inferiority on the Island, in which he cites the problem as being rooted in a European influence. These sentiments come prior to the Revolution, which is important because it projects an attitude that precedes the following works. Thus, we are able to discern the textual discourse of pre-revolutionary literature in order to understand better the contrast and/or similarities to post-revolutionary literary expressions. Many younger Cuban writers were touched by his mentorship and friendship. Piñera particularly influenced Reinaldo Arenas in his writing. Both Piñera and Arenas were persecuted for their homosexuality, and each found that their literature was censored for “counter-revolutionary” tendencies; both authors wrote of homoerotic experiences, which the Revolution associated with corrupting and perversion of the youth. Arenas was eventually incarcerated and left Cuba in 1980 in the Mariel Boatlift mass exodus (Pedraza 318). Throughout the Revolution, Arenas and his contemporaries went to extremes to continue their literary works; they had to hide manuscripts in unsuspecting places and organize clandestine meetings to discuss works. The local organizations such as the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución [Committees for the Defense of the Revolution] (CDR) were effectively authoritative enforcement that monitored and persecuted those non-compliant with the Revolution (Menton 116). Arenas remembers 1963 as a time when persecution of writers, homosexuals and other forms of

counterrevolutionaries began to increase, making it not only difficult to publish, but dangerous. Arenas expresses in his work the willingness to continue living unimpeded, smuggling some of his manuscripts to be published outside of Cuba (Arenas 118). Up until 1974 Arenas would go to Lenin Park on the outskirts of Havana with a surreptitious literary group of five others to share stories and write poetry against the consent of the government. Even though the works could not be shared, it was a “consolation” for them in times of suppression (Arenas 124). Eventually Arenas was persecuted and arrested, noting that the UNEAC report described him as a “homosexual counterrevolutionary who had dared to publish books abroad” (Arenas 155). His autobiographical novel, *Antes Que Anochezca*, was not published until 1992 posthumously after his suicide in his New York apartment in 1990 (McDowell). This work lies at the other end of the spectrum from Piñera, taking on a reflective and post-exodus perspective. Edmundo Desnoes, like Piñera and Arrufat, spent time in both Cuba and abroad prior to the Revolution. Desnoes lived for eight years in the United States prior to returning to Havana in 1960 where he wrote for the literary magazine *Revolución*. His novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo* was published in 1965 and is his most successful work. It was not until the reproduction of the novel as a film directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea in 1968, that the work received notable recognition (Luis 7). Desnoes’ “dual upbringing” in Cuba and the United States allows a unique perspective; he notes a want to express the contrast of societies and their “development,” especially returning to Cuba as a bourgeois intellectual (Desnoes 9). The novel took on an experiential form stemming from his status, as he puts it: “[a] middle-class skeptical intellectual doubtful about everything” (Luis 10). Antón Arrufat was not as fortunate

with the publishing of his play *Los siete contra Tebas* in 1968. Arrufat and Heberto Padilla were both winners of the UNEAC Literary Prize for Arrufat's play and Padilla's collection of poems *Fuera del Juego* (1968). These works were subsequently examined thoroughly by the UNEAC and came to a unanimous decision that: 1) The award winning works would be published as theater and poetry respectively 2) However, the UNEAC committee director would include a note in both works expressing the disaccord for its ideologies contrary to the Revolution, and 3) They would include the votes of the judges awarding the literary prizes to signify the discrepancy in the process (Arrufat 7). This recognition set the stage for both authors as counter-revolutionary. The "Caso Padilla," (Padilla Affair) is infamously known for Padilla's arrest in 1971, being held in the Investigations Department for a month, and upon his release was forced to give a reconciliatory "public confession" of his wrongdoings, malintent and literary injustice (Tennant). Padilla fled the Island at his first chance in 1980, whereas Arrufat stayed in Cuba unable to publish for fourteen years (Tennant). This ignited the extreme censorship that all artists began to feel in the *quinquenio gris*, which is the term used to describe the "política cultural – digo, *anticultural*– de la primera mitad de los años 70" (Fornet 4) (political culture – better said, *anticulture*– of the first half of the 1970s).<sup>1</sup> Fornet describes the extremity of this political tactic that affected at least a thirty-year span of literature beginning in 1970, as an irreversible phenomenon that suppressed and literary expression, and thus cultural fortitude (Fornet 3). The analysis of *Los siete contra Tebas* is a pivotal inclusion in this research study because of its place in Cuban literature– Arrufat is critical and resistant of the Revolution and its cultural affects,

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of Amrbosio Fornet are mine.

while ironically contributing to a national literature in the process. This holistic approach to the pre-and-post-revolution literature allows for an apt investigation into the nature of the Island and its cultural development.

These writers lived through the Revolution, experienced the successes and failures of the new regime, and bring both similar and varying perspectives to the literary arena. Ultimately, this study seeks to understand the condition of Cuban culture from the perspective of these four authors, and their portrayal of the Island as incarcerating and textual feminization of the Island. What do these literal and metaphorical images and symbols illustrate about the cultural climate, and the effects that this ostracism and lack of space implicate on the future cultural progression of Cuba? I formulate my argument in explications of various passages that incorporate these symbols. The portrayals of the Island in the texts I analyze depict a “lack of space” culturally– restricted by the transition of governance, confines of the Island, and the systemic censorship. My explication interprets the texts as projecting a state of Cuba that has been suffocating and limited in its ability to produce literary works. In some respects, the authors criticize the inability of the individual to express freely, while in others it is the colonial predisposition of the Island and its Plantation affects that determine the societal norms and cultural underdevelopment even after the Revolution. All of the texts work together to engage a platform for rhetoric moving forward that discusses what it means to have a national literature, what it means to be a Cuban writer, and how the debate of Cuba’s national culture will form in the future.

## Chapter 1: Entrapment of ‘The Island’

The Island of Cuba – to the northwest is the Gulf of Mexico, the northeast is the North Atlantic Ocean, and bordering the south is the Caribbean Sea – it is by nature enclosed by bodies of water. This geographical distinction has not only shaped the history of the development of Cuba (economically, socially, culturally), but remains a focal point for the authors in their literary works post-revolution. This chapter is going to analyze the projection of the Island as incarcerating and ultimately entrapping in the twentieth century, specifically reading post-revolutionary authors. The literary works to be discussed in this chapter—*Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Desnoes, 1965), *Los siete contra Tebas* (Arrufat, 1968), and *Antes que anochezca* (Arenas, 1992)—project the nature of the Island as incarcerating and entrapping, thus affecting the outcome of Cuban individualism and culture. The texts advance a lack of space amidst the new societal developments in the Revolution.

The notion of “entrapment,” “incarceration,” and “confinement,” is not a modern development in Latin American literature. It has been embedded in discourse in Latin America that is rooted in a colonial history. Taking both literal and metaphorical forms within the text, authors of the nineteenth and (more often) twentieth centuries have portrayed entrapment for a number of notable reasons. Concerned with the disappearing of an autochthonous culture because of the natives’ relationship to the foreign colonizers, we have often seen an expression of entrapment due to the authors’ entrenchment in an external society (Rosenberg 14). Further, the critics of Latin American culture have seen the predetermined familial ties and hierarchical social characteristics of Latin America as an expression of entrapment (Madsen 125). The

nature of “the Island,” as physically circumscribed by water is a contributing component to how Cuban authors have seen the Island as a site of potential incarceration in the Caribbean and its literature. At the turn of the twentieth century (and even prior) with declarations of independences and revolutions, the projection of entrapment is utilized to criticize the progression of the country economically, politically, socially and culturally (Arnold, Dash, Rodriguez-Luis 243). The texts analyzed in this study have consistencies within the broader Latin American framework of “entrapment,” and we will investigate further to understand the uniqueness in both usage and in a Cuban cultural context.

Depending on the individual perspective, primarily ones economic status, the Revolution was met with either great enthusiasm or dissidence. In cultural terms, the months following the 1959 overthrow of Fulgencio Batista was followed by a “so-called honeymoon” of literary enthusiasm and production. However, as we have alluded to in the Introduction, the establishment of an institutionalized culture was propelled shortly thereafter that commenced a monitoring and surveillance by the government (Menton 3). As will be discussed interwoven in the chapter, the discourse over the nervousness of censorship continued to expand– and the government attempted to prevent anything “against” the Revolution (Menton 138). Prior to the Revolution, the entrapping qualities projected are consistent with the symbol in Latin American literature– confronting the issue of a colonized and unequal society. The entrapment expressed in this selection of Cuban literature post-revolution I will argue is threefold: 1) Edmundo Desnoes portrays the protagonist as entrapped by his bourgeois tendencies as the revolution creates change to his societal position 2) Reinaldo Arenas utilizes the incarceration in a more



literal sense as he reflects on the constricting forces stemming from revolutionary mandates, as well as the physical inescapability of the Island and its societal regulations

3) Antón Arrufat expresses the entrapment of the Island as a division of ideologies and uncertainties of a more successful future in Cuba. Here we will examine how these various distinct portrayals of entrapment ultimately illustrate the “lack of space” and underdevelopment present in Cuban culture.

A novel-turned-movie centered on disillusionment and lack of participation in the Cuban Revolution, Edmundo Desnoes’ *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Inconsolable Memories*) (1965) is an existential recount of the transitional period on the island post-1959. As a member of the bourgeois class in 1961, the main character Sergio is trapped in every sense of the word – a businessman and not a writer that he has wanted to be, left by family and his wife Laura who leave Cuba for the United States, and passively living as the new political and economic circumstances of the revolution impose their will unto him. ‘The Island’ and its parameters have dictated his every move and eliminated individuality necessary in developing a fulfilling life. The feeling of impotence and resignation are viewed through the authors projection of ‘The Island’ as imprisoning:

Anoche no pude dormir. Vuelvo de nuevo de la calle. Hay un norte muy violento. Las olas rompen y saltan por encima del muro, rompen contra los camiones y los autos, contra las rejas y las paredes picadas de las fachadas. El aire queda todo espolvoreado de agua. Hace frío. Varias explosiones de agua se derrumban sobre nosotros, regando pedazos de madera por toda la calle (Desnoes *Memorias* 217).

(Last night I couldn’t sleep. Today I went out into the street again. A biting north wind is blowing. The waves hit the seawall and fling themselves over the barrier, crash down on the trucks and cars, against the iron rails and the pockmarked facades. The air gets all powdery with water then. It’s cold. Several watery bursts crashed down on us,

scattering dark pieces of water-soaked wood onto the street) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 172).

Sergio's soliloquized rant near the end of the novel (which is a form taken throughout) alludes to the imminent Bay of Pigs Invasion<sup>2</sup> due to the looming doom he carries after he listened to the radio of the American intervention the night before. He further expresses his outlook of helplessness with the insertion of outside forces directing the course of his life. The imagery that the author utilizes places the main character metaphorically in a gloomy, forlorn prison encapsulated by the sea. Desnoes portrays a cold, stormy day with waves crashing over "the barrier" that separates the outside world and those on the Island, confined by the "iron rails and the pockmarked facades." These incarcerating features signify the systemic manner in which Cubans are not only exploited, but also confined to a specific economy and society, leaving scant room for individualism and expression.

The origin of the systemic creation of Cuba as a unique cultural prison stems from its being a part of the Antillean Archipelago and predisposition to colonial rule and Plantation economy. Although each island is unique in various factors, what Antonio Benítez Rojo calls the overarching "Machine" imposed throughout history is relevant to this day and can be seen beyond the economic factors. Benítez Rojo claims, "the extraordinary effects of the sugar-making machine's dynamics in colonial societies... do not end with the abolition of slavery" (Benítez Rojo 73). He notes that each varying circumstance within the archipelago's history leads to changes within the specific institution depending on the situation, "but the plantation machine in its

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<sup>2</sup> The Bay of Pigs Invasion, referred to by Cubans as Playa Girón was an attack on the shores of Cuba by the rebel army with hopes of support from the United States that never came in April of 1961.

essential features keep on operating as oppressively as before”(Benítez Rojo 73). The oppressiveness Benítez refers to is the “hierarchized structure [that] will always seem ideal to the small group that holds the economic power by force, and thus its rigidity and disproportion will essentially persist under more modern work relations, and will continue to exert a similar influence in all of the different spheres of the national life” (Benítez Rojo 74). It is this feudalistic institution that leaves the lower classes and the *other* in society in an impotent state. The authors analyzed in this chapter present a vision of a disenfranchised *pueblo* versus a power-wielding elite, which was not the preconceived expectation of a revolutionary society. In Desnoes’ novel, Sergio recognizes his immobility in society due to the structural limitations in his situation as part of the bourgeoisie class during the revolutionary period. The Plantation pertains to more than just economics and the social-classes, but extends itself into the creation of culture– or inability to create. It is this immobility and entrapment that denotes the lack of space in the cultural arena of the island to promote thoughts and express ideas that are against the normative cause.

A very clear connection drawn to ‘The Island’ as imprisoning is the instance in which Sergio from *Memorias del subdesarrollo* is quite literally in jail. The tone that radiates from the passage is parallel to the sticky, suffocated, and constricting characteristics of a penitentiary. In his book *Prose Fiction of the Cuban Revolution*, which categorizes and analyzes the collection of Cuban literature from 1959-1970s, Seymour Menton remarks that Sergio “recognizes all the negative aspects of prerevolutionary bourgeois life and despises all its representatives,” yet “he cannot liberate himself from his past and clings to such bourgeois habits as having a lower-

class mistress” (Menton, 29-30). All of the works analyzed in this thesis suggest that the past is inescapable and the future is predestined, except for those able to flee the country. Sergio is left behind by his wife and family, however, and as Menton says, he is reduced to clinging on to the habits of a bourgeois subject alienated by those around him. He finds himself on trial for seducing an underage girl (Elena) into intercourse.

This leads Sergio to reminisce on his first time in prison:

Me sentía desnudo, expuesto a una manera de pensar y actuar que para mí era totalmente ajena. Primera vez que caía preso. Me prometí no discutir con nadie, y usar siempre gestos rudos... Temprano por la mañana sacaron a uno, el más alto del grupo, que se había puesto a cantar durante la madrugada... Creo que es la única vez en mi vida que he sentido envidia. Deseaba salir corriendo de la celda y de la estación. Estaba fatigado de tener a tanta gente a mi alrededor, mirándome, pensando mentiras de mí. No podía relejarme. Sudor y orines y humedad y mierda y halitosis. Todo era pegajoso e incómodo. Estaba desesperado por encontrarme solo, solo. Pensé que simplemente salir y caminar por la calle – como haría pronto aquel tipo alto – era la máxima felicidad. Andar por la calle libre, respirar y mirar a la gente y moverse me pareció toda la felicidad que podía aspirar un hombre (Desnoes *Memorias* 103-104).

(I felt naked, exposed to a way of thinking and acting that was totally foreign to me. First time I was ever locked up. I promised myself to avoid any squabble and always answer with rough gestures... Early next morning they came and released one of my cellmates, the tallest in the group; he'd been singing way into the early hours of the morning... Think it's the only time in my life I've felt envy. Wanted to run out of the cell and away from the station house. I was exhausted from so many strange bodies and faces surrounding me, watching me there, making up lies about me. I couldn't relax. Sweat and urine and dampness and shit and bad breath. Everything sticky and uncomfortable. I was desperate for privacy, even loneliness. Just to be able to walk freely along any street – like the guy they took away – seemed to me the utmost happiness possible. To walk unhampered through the streets, breathing freely, watching other people go by; just to wander around seemed to be all the happiness a man could ever desire in this world) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 160).

With the symbolism of ‘The Island’ as a prison, the reader should look closely at the first line of the passage with regards to Sergio internalizing a feeling of vulnerability

and foreignness. Antonio Benítez Rojo's lens from *The Repeating Island* would suggest that Sergio expressing this tone his first time in prison would correlate to the sentiments of an everyday citizen of Cuba that has been subject to a colonial and subsequent neocolonial rule. Due to the structure of society being based upon a certain set of standards that has benefited Sergio, a domestic change feels foreign. The nationalization of businesses effect his economic status and the rape accusation that he endures is something that would not have even been discussed prior to this transition. The people that surround him, and are making up lies of him, are a revolutionary example of the continuation of the Plantation society— although it is not a Spanish colonial rule that is determining economic policies and structuring of society, it is a (then) present day version of the governing body administering legislation and regulating the individual, which leaves Sergio uncomfortable and in a state of confusion and static.

Edmundo Desnoes' description of Sergio's time in jail is a metaphor for the realization of inescapability from the Machine functioning in Cuba and the insufficient space for authors in particular to express themselves freely. Michel de Certeau discusses the function of boundaries and the concept of space with regards to the cultivation of culture in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The importance of narrative is recognized as an interpretive tool of the "place" and the delimitations manufactured by its borders. De Certeau claims that the story has a significant role in the construction of society and is a cultural agent, which allows "*spatial legislation*" to divide or recognize the division of land (metaphorically and literally) (de Certeau, 122). The effect that enables the creation of space and in this case the restriction of space are summarized by de Certeau here:

[The formation of boundaries] is a ‘culturally creative act.’ It even has distributive power and performative force when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces. Reciprocally, where stories are disappearing, there is a loss of space: deprived of narrations, the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality. By considering the role of stories in delimitation, one can see that the primary function is to *authorize* the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits, and as a consequence, to set in opposition, within the close field of discourse, two movements that intersect (setting and transgressing limits) in such a way as to make the story a sort of ‘crossword’ decoding stencil (a dynamic partitioning of space) whose essential narrative figures seem to be the *frontier* and the *bridge* (de Certeau 123).

The authorization of limits that de Certeau discusses are not necessarily authorized in the narrative of *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, but the novel implies the consequences of the inequitable ‘partitioning of space.’ Referring back to the block quote from Desnoes’ novel above, Sergio’s desire to break free from his cell and run freely can only be described as a yearning to exit the existing space that has exerted control on culture, and discover a space that permits individuality.

It is also seen through Desnoes allowing the reader inside the existential mind of the protagonist. In this scenario we as the reader have access to Sergio’s view from his imprisoned situation. He describes the ability of a man who was just freed from prison who now is capable of walking freely about the city sans inhibitions or restrictions—utilizing diction such as ‘wander,’ ‘unhampered,’ ‘breathing freely,’ simply ‘watching other people go by.’ To achieve the ultimate happiness by visualizing what the common reader perceives as an everyday act heightens the interpretation of lack of space available for the individual at an elementary level in post-revolutionary Cuba. Michel de Certeau discusses everyday practices such as *walking* in the city which helps understand the significance such behaviors have on the creation of culture. The singular

act itself is a composition for each specific individual, and thus “their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities” (de Certeau 97). As a collective, “their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize” (de Certeau 97). Therefore, the utopia that Sergio projects unto the released prisoner’s experience of walking around the city is more than just a hopeless lamentation. His incarceration and inability to complete simple everyday tasks is symbolic of the lack of and/or change of social liberties in the new economy and society. Without these liberties, Desnoes is limiting the possibility of a collective. The lack of individualism effects the culmination of a culture immensely, which as we have seen and will continue to discuss is largely attributed to the suffocating qualities of ‘The Island.’

A uniting factor of the authors I am analyzing is their perception politically, economically and socially, of the Revolution as a suppressive force culturally. The revolutionaries began making decisions immediately on their entrance into Havana on the first of January. This longstanding surge for a Revolution was finally at the helm of governance. The first months were crucial to the tone and outlook of the overwhelmingly supported government distribution systems and popular mobilization that confronted the vast disparity in socio-economic status and overall living standards. The three main early acts were the Literacy Campaign, Rationing, and Agrarian Reform (Kapcia, 47). The latter two focused on a reconstruction of the economy, attempting to reduce the dominant capitalist influences. The early successes toward establishing an egalitarian economy for the middle and lower classes accelerated the drive towards socialism. Even with this enthusiasm and support the Literacy Campaign “was one of

the Revolution's most ambitious and most successful reforms, involving the mobilization of some 271,000 teachers – to teach the 979,000 Cubans identified as illiterate” (Kapcia 47). The literature that was derived during and the years following these changes that commenced in 1959 celebrated the country's development. Seymour Menton classifies this period as “*Post 1959 Settings: Socialist Propaganda and Remnants of Bourgeois Consciousness*” in which a vast majority of the works purposefully attempted to “capture the tremendous revolutionary enthusiasm generated by the 1961 campaign to eliminate illiteracy” (Menton 25).

However, Rafael Rojas accosts the ensuing cultural consequences head on in his book *El estante vacío* the title of which translates to “The empty bookshelf” – a knock at the inability to publish literature in Cuba. Where education and literacy were primary goals of the Revolution, a sense of control loomed heavily. Rojas points to remarks made by Castro: “se dirigía al pueblo de la isla con estas palabras: <<No les decimos crean, les decimos lean.>> (Rojas 24)” (“he addressed the people of the island with these words: ‘We are not telling you to create, we are telling you to read’”)<sup>3</sup>. Rojas utilizes this quote to illustrate how Cuban socialism would extend to the cultural sphere with its regulations; the space to create was purposefully honed in on in an attempt to assemble a united voice of discourse in society that was favorable for the Revolution.

Desnoes projects this entrapment onto his main character Sergio, referring back to the passage about Sergio's desire to leave the prison: “No podía relejarme. Sudor y orines y humedad y mierda y halitosis. Todo era pegajoso e incómodo” (Desnoes *Memorias* 103) (“I couldn't relax. Sweat and urine and dampness and shit and bad

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<sup>3</sup> All translations of Rojas' work are mine.



breath. Everything sticky and uncomfortable. I was desperate for privacy, even loneliness”) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 160). The sensation that Sergio describes himself in is utterly distressing, inescapable; the key words that relate Sergio’s incarceration –in prison and on the island– to the pressure placed on the literature by the Revolution are ‘even loneliness.’ For Sergio, at least in loneliness there is space for an individual thought without judgment and scrutiny. Unfortunately, Sergio is cognizant of his own impotence, claiming “no voy a tratar de huir por las rendijas como una cucaracha. Ya no hay rendijas. Las rendijas y los agujeros y los refugios se acabaron” (Desnoes *Memorias* 132) (I’m not going to try to sneak away through the cracks like a cockroach. There aren’t any more cracks left. Cracks and holes and shelters are over”) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 175). No more cracks, holes, and shelters, seemingly denotes the “loss of space,” that de Certeau implies the end to the creation of culture (De Certeau, 123). If the individual is suffering from this loss of space and room to move, there is no longer a space to create culture.

Reinaldo Arenas features expressions of entrapment and incarceration as a writer on ‘The Island,’ in his autobiography *Antes Que Anochezca (Before Night Falls)*. Similarly, the scope applies to Edmundo Desnoes under the lens of Michel de Certeau with regards to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Antonio Benítez Rojo’s theoretical stance on the cyclical nature of history among the Antillean Archipelago. Further, ‘The Island’ is a circumscribing force that regulates the individual – especially in Arenas’ scenario as being a part of “the other” as a homosexual with ‘counterrevolutionary’ content– leaving little space for cultural development.

*Antes Que Anochezca* casts 'The Island' as an entrapping entity which has alluring features at its brink to portray it as a time-capsuled prison in which Arenas lived. The autobiography is written chronologically and broken into sections recounting significant moments, people and influences in his life. A work of nearly thirty years, Arenas lived through the Revolution as an adolescent, discovered himself as a homosexual and a writer, and was thereby oppressed and incarcerated. Not only did Arenas make friends and connections who were able to publish his literature abroad, but his homosexuality categorized him as "against" the revolution, and was persecuted and incarcerated as such. This led to an eventual emigration during the Mariel Boatlift exodus of 1980 after his release. As a fascinated youth interested in joining the revolutionaries, he recognized the transition of an initial enthusiasm to overthrow the current dictator to a revolution turned communist society. Although the initial passage does not directly describe the physical features of 'The Island' as incarcerating, Arenas recounting of the *Playa Girón* celebration alludes to the mesmerizing nature of the Revolution as it grew rapidly to something that was not publicized—communism— and people continued their blind enthusiasm. After the defeat of the counterrevolutionaries Arenas was shocked by the reactions of the thousands of fellow youths, teachers, and local employees, writing "se lanzaron a la explanada y a la calle central de los edificios de la beca, y empezaron a gritar consignas comunistas. La más popular fue aquella que decía: <<Somos socialistas pa'lante y pa'lante y al que no le guste, que tome purgante>>" (Arenas 82) ("[they] rushed out to the esplanade and the main road in the school complex, and started shouting communist slogans. The most popular of these was: *We are socialists, / and for socialism we shall toil, / and whoever doesn't like it, /*

*let him swallow castor oil*" (Koch 58). Arenas notes how prior to this transitional event, the communist vision of the Revolution was being implemented but not acknowledged—there was a clandestine component to it. However, once the Revolutionary Army won the Bay of Pigs Invasion the Communist Revolution was recognized in a major way; chants, parades, slogans and everyday acts were unveiled to gain momentum and spread rapidly. Arenas' expression of this scene retrospectively suggests that he had an uneasy feeling about the ensuing nature of the regime, and what it would do for him personally.

A culture depends greatly on the ability of individuals and groups to operate in "spaces" which in turn displays a level of *authority* or *competency* that the everyday civilian can latch onto (de Certeau 7). The established powers and 'the strong' have exemplified their leverage in history – through a socio-economic or political advantage—the ability to create the space for discourse that engages in the cultivation of popular culture. De Certeau explains how this development takes place amidst a new order:

A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference... Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game, that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space (de Certeau 18).

This lens cast over 'The Island,' and in this particular instance as a significant period of new sociopolitical order, sheds light onto the ease in which the space created acts as a vacuum—encapsulating those in favor, indifferent, and perhaps opposed to the order. Arenas describes his experience in this very space, "y de pronto, en medio de aquella ola de jóvenes que gritaban consignas, yo me vi envuelto, arrastrado, marchando y

cantando como los demás. Al principio no lo hice, pero tampoco protesté” (Arenas 82) (“And in the midst of that wave of young men shouting slogans, I suddenly saw myself participating, carried away, marching and singing like all the others. At first I did not join in, but I did not protest either”) (Koch 58). It is important to recognize the cognizance of the situation that Arenas acknowledges his disillusionment, or at the very least an indifference. The passivity and simply going through the motions in the existing space are a direct lead to a creation of culture— one which can inevitably turn to an inescapable space for those that end up opposing it. Not only is the popular culture able to manifest itself in a way that permits an ease of assimilation, but it can happen at a rapid pace “De manera insólita, toda aquella multitud había pasado en menos de un minuto del socialismo al comunismo” (Arenas 83) (“In a strange way that crowd, in less than a minute, had passed from socialism on to communism”) (Koch 58). Just like that, Arenas exudes a shocked and frozen-like existence merely watching as the process unfolds. Although there are no physical allusions to ‘The Island,’ there is a motif of impotence and entrapment permeating the passage.

In order for the space to open up, such as Arenas describes in how the adoption of communism unfolded, there needs to be a belief bestowed upon the people of the society. Michel de Certeau describes two figures in society that are in position to sway a society – both because of position and knowledge. The Expert operates in the sociopolitical arena, mediating between society and his/her expertise. To be effective, “in the Expert, competence is transmuted into social authority” (de Certeau 7). It is a balance of competence and authority that are utilized in the conversion and mobilization of a movement. Reinaldo Arenas utilizes a religious analogy to denote authority placed

over the citizens and volunteers who are eventually going to aid in the various reforms, but also aid in the extension of the ideologies:

Habíamos sido adoctrinados en una nueva religión por toda la Isla; éramos los guías ideológicos de una nueva forma de represión: seríamos los frailes que diseminarian por todas las granjas estatales de la Isla la nueva ideología oficial. La nueva Iglesia tendría en nosotros sus nuevos monjes y sacerdotes, además de su policía secreta (Arenas 83)

(We had been indoctrinated in new religion all over the Island. We were the ideological guides of a new kind of repression, we were the missionaries who would spread the new official ideology among all the state farms in the Island. The new religion had in us its new monks and priests, and also its new secret police) (Koch 58-59).

This passage describes the manner in which an ‘Expert’ at the wake of a new space can capture and captivate an audience to a belief (Arenas cites Fidel as the leader and beneficiary of this space). Once the space is rooted at the slightest, whether devoted or indifferent, the ideology creeps into the people’s beliefs and their competence of the knowledge enables an extension of authority and continued development. The sarcastic tone and mention of secret police alongside the religious positions signifies the inescapability of the movement and encloses ‘The Island’ in a state of unified thought – either indoctrinate or find yourself on the outside looking in; unfortunately for Cuba, the outside is water and as Arenas remarks “repressing.”

The ‘Expert’ and authority that has dictated the progression of the Cuban Revolution has been institutionalized, and the power complex exerted can be seen through the lens of *The Repeating Island* as a manifestation of the Plantation society. The terms in which a hierarchical power is transferred is stated by Antonio Benítez Rojo as:

–repeating itself. Hence, in Cuba, from that time until now, anything that threatens the sugar-producing order, whatever the political and

ideological nature of the group managing the power of the sugar mill, is always called anti-Cuban. In reality, ever since the Plantation was first set up, sugar has been carrying out a national security policy that first saw itself anti-abolitionist, later as anti-independence, then it called itself 'democratic' and now 'revolutionary.' At bottom this national security policy has not changed substantially, it has repeated itself while adjusting to Cuba's historical realities. Its propaganda apparatus has elaborated, through time, such slogans as 'without slaves there is no sugar,' 'without sugar there is no country,' and 'the Cuban's word: the ten million are coming!' Thus sugar is the same as the fatherland, and to produce sugar is to be Cuban. Years ago, when someone sought to change the sugar world's status quo he was identified as an enemy and called a 'revolutionary'; now he's called a 'counterrevolutionary,' although he is the same individual. The extremes bend to form a circle and they don't mean anything. What really matters, what really has national and patriotic significance in the secular religion, is sugar; the only thing that constitutes tradition, the thing that must be preserved and protected is the myth of the sugar mill, which offers itself in perpetuity as the center or genealogical origin of Cuban society (Benítez Rojo 114-115).

This very cyclical nature that Benítez Rojo describes reveals how 'The Island' at the core of its history has been programmed to operate in a specific way. The Expert governing the current ideological stance can change. The existence of the Plantation contains a predetermining factor that destines Cubans to a society that extends from the Plantation economy. Arenas invites the reader into his experience through the transgression of this 'repetition,' as a member of "the other," or as he refers to it as the system of *parametrage* [parameterization], relative to the ideologies imposed. From 1961-1970, the Agrarian Reform that was enacted to decrease the reliance on Western economy and instill egalitarian methods was altered with the increased 'partnership' of Cuba with Russia. Benítez Rojo notes the slogan addressing the Ten Million Ton sugar harvest and a reversion to the monocrop economy. It is from this commitment of *voluntarismo* – "the cornerstone of the Revolution's labour mobilization strategy" – that dictate the ensuing societal regulations (Kapcia 66). For Arenas, his homosexuality was

reason enough for the Cuban government to defame and parameterize him. He describes his options in such a society as being reduced to “trabajar en la agricultura o tener un cargo de sepulturero eran las ofertas que se les hacían a los intelectuales parametrados” (Arenas 164) (“Agricultural labor or gravedigger jobs were the kinds of work offered to the ‘parameterized’ intellectuals”) (Koch 138). Although the Revolution intended to create economic independence, a return to the institution of the Plantation rose to the forefront once again and dominated the pretext for employment. Aviva Chomsky summarizes this concept as stemming from an inequitable control of the economy for a domestic elite; simply put, “the country’s resources were made by the outsiders, for the benefit of the outsiders” (Chomsky 46). Although the economy idealistically had shifted to benefit the lower and middle class domestically, the same economic institution remains. And as Arenas projects, this economic parameterization extends beyond just that, and has an overarching effect on society. Arenas characterizes Fidel’s belief as incarcerating, “ya para entonces era imposible pensar en abandonar el país, pues desde 1970 Fidel había proclamado que todo el que quería irse del país ya lo había hecho, convirtiendo la Isla en una cárcel cerrada, donde todo el mundo, según él, estaba feliz de permanecer” (Arenas 164) (“Since 1970 Fidel had been proclaiming that all those who wanted to leave had done so. Thus the Island became a maximum-security jail, where everybody, according to Castro, was happy to stay”) (Koch 139). Even though Arenas was in clear opposition to the repressiveness of the current society, the inability to leave and direct comparison to ‘The Island’ as a maximum-security jail represents the limited space available to coexist as himself. Prior to the Revolution, the revolutionaries idealized a state that rid themselves of Western dependence and beliefs. It is interesting

then, that Arenas expresses envy for Western tourists with their material goods and ability to come and go: “Pero lo más impresionante de todo era cuando uno de aquellos turistas, a los que habíamos contado nuestros horrores, volvía a Occidente. Aquella persona se convertía ante nosotros es una especie de ser mágico por el solo hecho de poder de coger un avión y salir de aquella isla; salir de aquella prisión” (Arenas 166) (“But the most impressive moment was when one of those tourists, to whom we had told our horror stories, returned to the West. That person became for us a magical being only because he or she could take a plane and leave the Island, leave that prison”) (Koch 141). The jealousy conveyed in the rhetoric of enjoying ordinary cultural freedoms portrays a suffocation and incarceration rooted from the system that they are apart of.

Reinaldo Arenas recognizes the “Brink” of the Island to address an allure of Cuba, but more emphatically project the inescapability and entrapment of the Island even further. When discussing some of the great influences in his life such as Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera, he laments the existing censorship that has prevented him and his compatriots from liberation – in day-to-day life as well as in writing– “Los dos, naturalmente, fueron condenados al ostracismo, y vivieron en la plena censura y en una suerte de exilio interior” (Arenas 110) (“Both writers, of course, suffered from ostracism and censorship, and lived in a sort of internal exile”) (Koch 84). Arenas then turns to Piñera’s “La Isla en Peso” to describe this exclusion of acceptance, “<<la maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes>> ejercía una atracción a la cual estos hombres no podían sustraerse” (Arenas 111) (“the cursed condition of being surrounded by water on all sides’ cast a spell that these men were unable to break”)



(Koch 85). Being described as an interior exile, Arenas blames the nature of the Island that is circumscribed by water; this projection of the Island generates an impotent space for these writers who can neither be part of the mass nor survive as an individual. There are moments in this work in which Arenas describes the ‘water’ as at the brink of the Island and often a space in which he was able to discover himself:

Con el tiempo el río se transformó para mí en el lugar de los misterios mayores. Aquellas aguas fluían atravesando los más intrincados recovecos, despeñándose, formando oscuros charcos que llegaban hasta el mar; aquellas aguas no iban a volver. Cuando llovía y llegaba el temporal, el río retumbaba y su estruendo llegaba hasta la casa; era un río enfurecido y a la vez acompasado que lo arrastraba todo. Más adelante pude acercarme y nadar en sus aguas; su nombre era el Río Lirio; aunque nunca vi crecer ni un solo lirio en sus orillas. Fue ese río que me regaló una imagen que nunca podré olvidar; era el día de San Juan, fecha en que todo el mundo en el campo debe ir a bañarse al río (Arenas 25)

(As time went on, the river became a place of deep mystery. Its waters followed the most intricate patterns through nooks and crannies, then plunged down, gathering in dark pools and flowing on to the sea, never to return. When it rained and the storms came, the river rumbled and its roar could be heard from our house; it was a raging relentless river, leveling everything in its path. Eventually I was able to approach and swim in its waters. It was called Río Lirio though I never saw any lilies growing on its banks. This was the river that gave me a gift an image that I will never forget. It was June 24, Saint John’s Day, when everyone around would come and bathe in the river) (Koch 8).

This quote illustrates the transition of water from the river to the ocean, but has some underlying themes that need to be discussed. The act of leaving and transforming that he writes is a parallel to his discovery of himself as a homosexual, and essentially as ‘the other’ in society. It was liberating, a day that he will never forget; this memorable event is almost a cleansing, and an introduction to his oasis on the brink of the normative standards that are circumscribed by the Island. The motif of the liberating qualities of the Sea juxtaposed with the incarcerating qualities of the Island permeates Arenas’ work. For example, one of the most unforgettable experiences Arenas had

throughout childhood and life was his first visualizing the Sea, “¡que decir de cuando por primera vez me vi junto al mar! Sería imposible describir ese instante; hay solo una palabra: el mar” (Arenas 50) (“How could I explain what I felt the first time that I saw the sea! It would be impossible to describe what I felt that moment. There is only one word that does it any justice: the Sea”) (Koch 28). There is an obsession surrounding the Sea, which is twofold; 1) He was able to discover himself and act homoerotic, and 2) It is also projected as a utopia in opposition to the dystopia of the Island. During his period of literal incarceration as an act of extreme censorship sentenced from his “counterrevolutionary” acts and writing, he paints an image in the readers mind that detest the inescapability of the Island and the confined space he has been condemned to. From his cell he describes a lethargic daydream, “el mar desde la prisión era algo remoto, situado detrás de una doble reja” (Arenas 204) (“The sea seemed to be very remote from the prison, inaccessible beyond a double set of bars” (Koch 179). If the Sea represents an oasis, utopia, discovery, unimpeded freedoms, creativity and homosexuality, then being behind bars and being isolated from that space represents the oppression he cares to express— denouncing the Island as a metaphorical prison.

In a comparable light, Antón Arrufat projects the nature of the Island as enclosed in his play *Los siete contra Tebas*. The plot of the play and the ensuing repercussions imposed by the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC— National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba) allows the reader to perceive the cultural stringencies enforced in the parameterized society. The drama unfolds as an allegorical representation of *The Bay of Pigs Invasion* in a recreation of Aeschylus tragedy *The Seven Against Thebes*, pitting two brothers Etéocles and Polinice against each other in a

fraternal civil war. Heberto Padilla and Antón Arrufat were thrust into the thick of the backlash from the UNEAC due to the success of their literary works in their respective genres; Padilla winning the UNEAC Literary Prize for his collection of poems *Fuera del Juego* and Arrufat for *Los siete contra Tebas* in 1968. Arrufat admittedly describes the years immediately following the Revolution as “active, and glorious,” with regards to cultural life (Tennant). He notes that “the Cuban Revolution had a creative aspect: establishing literary journals, theatre groups, libraries and museums, art colleges,” which contributed to Cuban culture in some productive ways (Tennant). Seymour Menton describes the months following the overthrowing of dictator Fulgencio Batista as:

the so-called honeymoon, or ‘romantic period of the Revolution,’ characterized by ‘espontaneidad y desorientación,’ [that] lasted until the spring of 1961. This spirit of enthusiasm, spontaneity, and rebelliousness found a cultural outlet in *Lunes de Revolución*, whose avant-garde tastes were several years ahead of the times, as far as the Cuban novel was concerned (Menton 1-2).

Arrufat concurs that the closing down of *Lunes de Revolución* along with the formation of the UNEAC was “another step towards the institutionalization of culture,” that struck fear in Cuban intellectuals and artists who were made aware of the Soviet path of control and censorship, “or, ‘supervision,’ as they called it back then,” that they were winding down (Tennant). Thus, there is a motif of societal and cultural oppression that permeates *Los siete contra Tebas* in the form of entrapping and constricting both the actual village and its citizens.

The imminent attack on the city of Thebes is visualized through the lens of a nervous village, which projects the lack of space culturally due to the powerful forces of governance at combat. The citizens gather in the village along with the Seis Adalides

(Six Leaders) that are there to protect them. The Spies describe the situation at hand, that behind each Puerta (door) that surrounds the city there is a warrior ready to fight and raid Thebes. The Spies depict a violent, haunting, and symbolic depiction of the different warriors that are behind each Puerta:

A Tideo la primera puerta, donde  
vocifera amenazas, gritando  
a sus hombres no teman al combate y la muerte.  
Está vestido de negro.  
Negras sus ropas, sus armas.  
El penacho de su cabalgadura.  
Sus adornos metálicos suenan  
con ruido aterrador. Lleva  
en su escudo este arrogante emblema:  
un cielo nocturno, todo  
encendido de astros,  
y la luna en medio  
como un ojo celeste.  
Esta noche nos amenaza,  
quiere apagar nuestros ojos  
y el resplandor del día (Arrufat 51).

(Tideo is behind the first door, where / he yells threats, shouting / to his men not to fear battle nor death. / He is dressed in black. / As are his clothes, and his weapons. / As is the plume of his mount. / His metallic adornments ring / with the noise of terror. He wears / on his shield this arrogant emblem: / A night sky, all / burning from asteroids, / and the moon in the middle / like a celestial eye. / This night threatens us, / you want to close your eyes / and return to the brightness of the day).<sup>4</sup>

This description of Tideo as the first enemy of Thebes is telling in both the inherently violent nature of the character, but the imagery of his threatening emblem as well. As

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<sup>4</sup> All translations of Arrufat are mine.

we have noted, after the so-called “honeymoon period” of cultural expression immediately following the commencement of the Revolution, the institutionalization of culture has repressed the ability for individuals to have access to artistic space in Cuban society. And although there is a literary consensus that Polinice and the exiled warriors attacking the city of Thebes are representative of the United States in their imperialistic Bay of Pigs Invasion, I will argue too that there is a correlation to the internal forces that constrict the Island. Tideo’s uncontrollable threat and intimidation can now be seen as a foreshadow for the conditions of the Island. The imagery of black clothes from head-to-toe, black weapons and a night sky that makes the opponent want to “return to the brightness of the day,” are symbolic of the blanketing of individual expression and cultural liberties. Further exemplifying the constrictive nature of the Island are the Chorus’ reactions to the idea of the invasion of their city and entrapment of their liberties:

V: ¡Rodearán la ciudad de Tebas! Moriremos de hambre y de sed!”  
IV: Me falta el aliento. El terror traba mi lengua” (Arrufat 38-39)  
(V: They will surround the city of Thebes! We will die of hunger and thirst! /  
IV: I can’t breathe. The terror has tangled my tongue).

In the concerning exclamations made by the Chorus, which is unequivocally known as a representation of the citizens of Cuba, there is pivotal diction used by the author imperative in the interpretation of the passage. The diction includes words such as “rodear,” (to surround), which is indicative of the enclosed feature unique to the Island. The comment is followed by the dreadful realization of potential consequences that are thought to lead to starvation and extreme thirst— elementary necessities of a functioning society. Further, the picture of a woman’s distress reaching a point of

difficulty breathing illustrates the graveness of the implications. Arrufat deliberately projects the image of a “tangled tongue,” as part of the reaction as a double entendre. The metaphor serves to further project the notion of an entrapped and constricting Island facing imminent attack, and more critically the as a portrayal of the binding and restricting forces of the cultural space– or lack there of.

The Island’s incarcerating and inescapable features are highlighted by the suffocation that they cause its inhabitants. By converging on the fundamental aspects of an individual’s well being– food, water and air – Arrufat is placing culture on this same platform. He would argue that the importance for breadth and deregulation of cultural production is a necessity and a staple of a healthy society. The parodying quality of his play *Los siete contra Tebas*, with its allegorical reinterpretation, show the lengths that Antón Arrufat goes to make this assertion.

The validity of which culminated in the heightening of censorship and further constriction of literary production. The entrapment of the Island was projected in unique and different stylized manners by the three authors. However, disillusionment and underdevelopment of culture and a lack of accessing a higher cultural individuality or collective are at the forefront of these works. Death (*Los siete contra Tebas*), incarceration and exodus (*Antes Que Anochezca*), exhaustion, confusion and the inability to literally write (*Memorias del subdesarrollo*) are all suggestive of the affects that a geographical and literary incarceration have on the individual and culture as a whole.

## Chapter 2: Feminizing the Island

There are a number of ways in which Cuban culture portrays the Island as *feminized* in the literature of pre and post-revolution. A critically detested and then acclaimed film in 1964 is an exemplary piece of Cuban art that exposes the notion of penetration of the outside world existing in and creating disparities on the Island. The film, *Soy Cuba*, was coproduced by the Soviet Union and Cuba with director Mikhail Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky heading the project. They set out to create an artistic representation and reflection of Cuban culture and way of life. However, after being shown in July of 1964 in both Russia and Cuba, the film was locked away and dispelled for its “touristic and exaggerated” representation of the Island from a “foreign mentality” (Loss and Prieto 111). In 1992 the film resurfaced in the United States after it was discovered and shown at the Telluride Film Festival, drawing an entirely different spectrum of reviews from the international film community. The Cuban critics remained in opposition of the same characteristics that were now praised for the bold, technical and cutting-edge camerawork and cinematography. A more apt inference from the denouncement of the film could come from the content and plot itself; the first scene is a point-of-view plunge into the Island starting from the Sea, weaving through the inner-river and rural jungle of Cuba, eventually reaching the city life which displays a beauty contest of females on the top of a poolside hotel roof. The imagery of the scene and cinematography throughout is phallic in nature, representative of the penetration of outside forces that have exerted themselves in Cuba throughout history. This movie sets the stage for a discussion about the feminization of the Island – spanning from colonial imposition and the patriarchal

society, to the rhythm of the Island, to the sexualizing of it. This projection of the Island as being penetrated, eroticized, or feminized is critical in understanding various aspects of the development of culture and the sentiments of its unraveling.

In this chapter we will be examining Virgilio Piñera's poem "La Isla en Peso," Edmundo Desnoes' novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, Antón Arrufat's play *Los siete contra Tebas* and Reinaldo Arenas' autobiography *Antes Que Anochezca* in order to discern the significance of how each work feminizes the Island. Each author has a different approach spanning from the projection of phallic imagery that penetrates the Island, to the symbolism of women and their role in a predisposed patriarchal society. Comparing Piñera's pre-revolutionary poem with a post-revolutionary play, novel and autobiography allow for an understanding and analysis of the continuities in the patriarchal characterization of the Island before and after the Revolution.

Of course, prior to these works, the utilization of the *feminine* characterization as it pertains to the land or the structure of society, is a motif that has permeated much of nineteenth and twentieth century literature— especially Latin American literature. Dorris Sommer suggests that "historical romances and politics go hand in hand in Latin America" (Sommer 111). Our investigation is not limited to "romances," but it is important to note that the feminization of the Island and/or the figure of the female is often linked to either a critique of the existing state or a projection of an ideal future (Sommer 112). At one point in Latin American history, literature was directly associated with politics, with authors writing about issues and getting involved in office and governmental positions. Paraphrasing Sommer, the "pendulum" swung back and forth in the nineteenth and twentieth century with regards to writer's roles in politics—



especially as many countries gained independence or underwent a revolution authors “often wrote from a ‘nativist’ or reformist opposition in order to sway opinion about, for example, race relations or economic policy” (Sommer 113). I will argue that the texts we are about to explore utilize feminization as it has been read throughout Latin American literature: criticizing the patriarchal and hierarchical society, the immaturity and underdevelopment of the Island, and the controversy of assimilation and equality. While also introducing some nuanced usages such as an anti-Oedipal complex that questions the attachment one should have to the Island. These texts are certainly unique to the historical and cultural context in Cuba at the time.

The patriarchal society that exists in Cuba in particular can date back to the arrival of the Europeans at the end of the fifteenth century. These works take into consideration the Plantation economy and society that was established by Spanish imperial powers. More pointedly to the rhetoric of their literary productions however, is the relationship that the Revolution has with the historical factors Cuba has been subject to, and whether there is a change in society or a repetition of the issues that have been ingrained in the Island’s history. Virgilio Piñera, Edmundo Desnoes, Antón Arrufat and Reinaldo Arenas are analyzed in this chapter in their feminization of the Island. Beginning with Piñera and concluding with Arenas, comprehensive interpretations of the textual projections are comprised to discern, ultimately, the nature of the Island and its ability to develop culturally.

Virgilio Piñera, (1912-1979), was part of the generation which preceded many of the notable Cuban writers associated with the literature of the Revolution and acted as a mentor to the young authors in their efforts towards creatively expressing amidst

the political and cultural shifts. Piñera was no stranger to an honest and open artistic expression in his works— he earned the nickname “la oscura cabeza negadora” (the dark negating head), being described as “bitter and ironic” (Chichester 232-233). Compatriot and fellow writer Lezama Lima addressed the goal of a national literature in his journal *Verbum* (first published in 1937):

*First:* To topple all political tendency in art, given that, at this moment, all political tendency that may not be strictly national is forcibly in error and can only lead to our total disappearance. *Second:* To topple all art of race, Hispanic-American or Afro-Cuban, which could be a great obstacle toward the integration of our nationality (qtd in Chichester 237-238)

These values led to the core of authors that founded *Orígenes*, an influential journal from 1944-1956 that had taken on neo-baroque style –which Piñera denounces as a variation of European modernism– in attempts to reinvigorate the *cubanidad* that José Martí had discussed years earlier (Chichester 242). The poem “La Isla en Peso,”(1943) became Piñera’s most notable work as a breaking off of the existing *Orígenes* style to criticize the reality of an “understanding of *cubanidad*” and also “the possibility of any national self-definition” (Weiss 3). This pre-revolutionary iconoclast came in the form of coarseness and overall desire for a harsh criticism. Chichester summarizes the poem as “a review of Cuban history seen as a chaotic, polyphonic collage of cultures and races” (Chichester 244). The feminization of the Island is a projection used to excite discourse on the historical predisposition to the impossibility of a national culture. Piñera writes amidst the furthest margin possible during a time of relative conservatism to express penetration, and even violation of the Island:

Hay que saltar del lecho y buscar la vena mayor del mar para  
desanjarlo.  
Me he puesto a pescar esponjas frenéticamente,

Esos seres milagrosos que pueden desalojar hasta la última gota de agua  
y vivir secamente.

Esta noche he llorado al conocer a una anciana  
que ha vivido ciento ocho años rodeada de agua por todas partes.

Hay que morder, hay que gritar, hay que arañar.

He dado las últimas instrucciones.

El perfume de la piña puede detener a un pájaro.

Los once mulatos se disputaban el fruto,  
los once mulatos fálicos murieron en la orilla de la playa.

He dado las últimas instrucciones.

Todos nos hemos desnudado. (Piñera 25-37)

(It makes you want to jump out of bed and find the main vein of the sea  
and bleed it dry.

I have fished frantically for sponges,  
miraculous creatures that can expel the last drop of water  
and survive completely dry.

Tonight I wept when I met an old woman  
who has lived a hundred eight years completely surrounded by water.

It makes you want to bite, scream, scratch.

I have made my will.

The scent of pineapple can stop a bird.

Even *mulatos* fought over its fruit,

Even phallic *mulatos* dies at the edge of the beach.

I have made my will.

We have all stripped naked.) (Weiss 25-37).

This passage demonstrates not only the surrounding forces that have imposed themselves upon the Island, but includes too the effects of this violation. Piñera begins the stanza with the hyperbolic personification regarding “la vena mayor del mar” (the main vein of the sea) and drying it out, symbolizing a phallic feature of the Sea in conjunction with the Island. The Sea is the access point to the Island – and where the foreigners, especially those who have established economic and societal power, are able

to infiltrate. Similar to the first scene of *Soy Cuba*, the Sea allows access to the external forces and enables the initial point of contact and subsequent ingression. Piñera then notes how he has engaged in a “frantic” search for a “miraculous creature” that can “expel that last drop of water / and survive completely dry.” The enjambment between the last two lines allows the reader to infer that he was unsuccessful in his attempt to find this creature. Piñera utilizes the extraordinary nature of this creature as a parallel to the Cuban natives; the Island’s people are left forever penetrated and thus influenced and impaired, never being able to reach a state of dryness, resulting in a permanently lost innocence. The tone of hopelessness, misery, and mourning exuded in the next verses depicts an old lady having lived on the Island for 108 years. Thus, the circumscription of the Sea has limited her mobility and expressiveness in perpetuity. Her actions show the discomfort that this violation has caused and represents: “hay que morder, hay que gritar, hay que arañar” (it makes you want to bite, scream scratch). The entrapment on the Island and biting, screaming and scratching are all qualities that portray a rape scene. The molestation alludes to the impregnation that this ‘old lady’ has endured throughout the colonial and neo-colonial conquests of the Island.

The feminization that is being analyzed as penetrative and violent suggests a proliferation of different areas where this process guides Cuba’s history that accumulates in the outcome of its economy, society, and cultural development. Cuba, being part of the “Peoples of the Sea,” is characterized by what Antonio Benítez Rojo describes as *rhythms* and *polyrhythms*. Colonialism, neocolonialism, immigration, slavery, and the outside forces exerted onto the Island have all disrupted and then assimilated in some fashion to create a new economy, society, and culture— what Cuban

anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined as a process of *transculturación* (Ortiz 2). This process is unavoidable and has led to the textual feminization of the Island because of the impregnating nature Cuba has analogized in its history. Benítez Rojo surmises the course of *rhythm to polyrhythm* here:

Nature is the flux of an unknowable feedback machine that society interrupts constantly with the most varied and noisy rhythms. Each rhythm is itself a flux cut through by other rhythms, and we can pursue fluxes upon rhythms endlessly. Well then, the culture of the Peoples of the Sea is a flux interrupted by rhythms which attempt to silence the noises with which their own social formation interrupts the discourse of Nature. If this definition should seem abstruse, we could simplify it by saying that the cultural discourse of the Peoples of the Sea attempts, through real or symbolic sacrifice, to neutralize violence and to refer society to the transhistorical codes of Nature (Benítez Rojo 16-17).

“La Isla en Peso” can be seen as a tool to hone in on and locate the fluxes introduced by such outside forces, thus creating a discourse for the existing rhythm of culture and its origins. For example, Piñera writes on the history of the Peoples of the Sea:

Las historias eternas frente a la historia de una vez del sol,  
las eternas historias de estas tierras paridoras de bufones y cotorras,  
las eternas historias de los negros que fueron,  
y de los blancos que no fueron,  
o al revés o como os parezca mejor,  
las eternas historias blancas, negras, amarillas, rojas, azules  
– toda la gama cromática reventando encima de mi cabeza en llamas–,  
la eterna historia de la cínica sonrisa del europeo  
llegado para apretar las tetas de mi madre. (Piñera 134-142)

(Eternal histories of the history of a day beneath the sun,  
eternal histories of these lands that bring forth buffoons and blowhards,  
eternal histories of blacks who were  
and whites who weren't,  
or the other way around or any way at all,

endless white, black, yellow, red, blue histories,  
– the whole chromatic spectrum bursting into flames above me–  
the endless history of the cynical smile of the European  
who had come to squeeze my mother’s teats.) (Weiss 134-142).

The eternality that Piñera alludes to suggests the motif of cyclical history that the Island has experienced and is subject to. He essentially is saying that this ‘paridora’ (fertile) land is there for the taking who has the will and power, noting the extractability of Cuba throughout history. The different colors, spanning to even yellow, red, and blue exudes a satirical tone which implies the difficulty in *transculturación*, and how the number of fluxes that have interrupted the rhythm of the Island and its existing culture has been seemingly infinite. Despite its immeasurable and ensuing number of fluxes and returns to rhythm, the entire “chromatic spectrum” does not even hold any weight because it is the European flux– the capacity and power of Western influence – that ultimately determines the route of history. The economic and cultural gains are clearly symbolized by the “European / who had come to squeeze my mother’s teats.” This feminization of the Island portrays the impotence of the Island once again, and the ability of a colonial power to dictate the Island’s cultural progress through its forceful and extractive interruption of society, rhythm, and culture.

Although “La Isla en Peso” is analyzed as having a political and personal agenda in Virgilio Piñera’s separation from his contemporaries’ philosophies and styles, its main function is to criticize the actuality of everyday life in the Cuba he lived in. Thomas F. Anderson affirms that “La Isla en Peso” “stands out for its negative tone, its implicit condemnation of imperialism, and its unmasking of the rampant problems of contemporary island life” (Anderson 32). This comment insinuates Anderson’s belief

that Piñera's poetic work functions as a critique of the societal norms and culture created through the Imperial powers that create flux and establish order in the Caribbean. Anderson introduces the poem as "Piñera's drastic change in direction, and of his desire to expose the absurdity and harshness of contemporary island life through the type of shocking images and coarse rhetoric that would soon become trademarks of his unique voice" (Anderson 32-33). There is no doubt that this is a statement piece that defined Piñera's career, voice, and otherness for him personally throughout his time spent in the Cuban cultural arena. However, its significance as a literary expressive work aids in understanding the systematic inequality and violation of everyday life. Michel de Certeau comments on the construct of a creative arena in society that will assist in the analysis of Piñera's *cubanista critique*:

The relation of procedures to the fields of force in which they act must therefore lead to a *polemological* analysis of culture. Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary. The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices (de Certeau xvii).

The thought of analyzing culture as a polemological entity addresses the nature in which Cuban authors take to their artistic expression the existential polemology they have physically experienced through everyday consumption and practices due to the uncontrollable and violent nature of the establishment of their society. The first stanza of *La Isla en Peso* is a manifestation of the everyday practices enforcing a patriarchal and penetrative force:

"Cuando a la madrugada la pordiosera resbala en el agua

en el preciso momento en que se lava uno de sus pezones,  
me acostumbro al hedor del puerto,  
me acostumbro a la misma mujer que invariablemente masturba,  
noche a noche, al soldado de guardia en medio del sueño de los peces.  
Una taza de café no puede alejar mi idea fija,  
en otro tiempo yo vivía adánicamente.  
¿Qué trajo la metamorfosis? (Piñera 7-15)

(When at dawn the woman who begs in the streets slides into the water,  
precisely when she's washing a nipple,  
I resign myself to the stench of the harbor,  
to her jacking off the sentry every night  
while the fish sleep.  
A cup of coffee won't dispel the fantasy  
that once I lived in edenic innocence.  
What caused the change?) (Weiss 7-15).

Piñera produces the juxtaposition of the notion of an edenic society – a paradise that is a common presumption (especially to foreigners) of reality on the Island– with the image of a beggar being degraded and sexualized by the “soldado de guardia” (sentry). The woman is representative of the Island, and the fact that she carries out this task every single day implicates the normalcy of the inequality in everyday Cuban life. This can also be interpreted as a social critique of the hierarchical class system during the pre-revolutionary Republic as another image of the patriarchal and potent figure of the officer – a clear allusion to imperial and feudal powers – being a benefactor of the resources of the Island. We can apply de Certeau to this scene: Piñera certainly is developing an “atmosphere of tensions” for which he utilizes his poetic platform to “articulate conflicts,” which, “alternatively legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force” (de Certeau, xvii). The political dimension that de Certeau mentions



with regards to the everyday practices is being revealed as patriarchal, unequal, and forceful, which in turn serves to “demystify the stereotypical image of the Antilles as a tropical paradise” (Anderson 32). De Certeau would agree that “a cup of coffee” projects the sentiment of an everyday activity that is appreciated in Island cultures (and Cuba in particular) brought over by the Spanish Imperial powers. This simple everyday act that may be enjoyed by all will not cover up the disparity recognized in other facets of society. Piñera is non-stop in his poem with a cutting coarseness and blatant depiction of the inhabitability of the Island due to the impotence of the Cuban people. An image that functions to surmise the penetrative and impregnated society of the Caribbean Island is:

La impetuosa ola invade el extenso salón de las genuflexiones.  
Nadie piensa el implorar, en dar gracias, en agradecer, en testimoniar.  
La santidad de desinflas en una carcajada.  
Sean los caóticos símbolos del amor los primeros objetos que palpe,  
afortunadamente desconocemos la voluptuosidad y la caricia francesa,  
desconocemos el perfecto gozador y la mujer pulpo,  
desconocemos los espejos estratégicos,  
no sabemos llevar la sífilis con la reposada elegancia de un cisne,  
desconocemos que muy pronto vamos a practicar estas mortales  
elegancias (Piñera 100-108)

(The violent wave invades the wide hall of genuflections.  
No one thinks to beg, thank, be grateful, testify.  
Sanctify collapses in a gale of laughter.  
Although love’s chaotic symbols are the first things touched,  
we have the luck to be ignorant of voluptuousness or cunnilingus,  
the perfect lover and the octopus woman, / the strategic mirrors,  
we don’t know how to bear syphilis with a swan-like grace,  
unaware that soon enough we’ll acquire these fatal refinements.) (Weiss  
100-108).

This passage of the poem epitomizes the unapologetic commentary of the racism, inequality and an incapability to thrive in such a culture imposed unto Cuba. The feminization of the Island and its peoples are seen in the image of a massive wave from the Sea crashing into a great hall which requires the citizens to bend a knee, a direct allusion to the imperial powers that have penetrated the Island. Piñera then inserts his commentary, wondering if the “syphilis,” which is a sexualized transmission of power, is something that Cuban’s should handle “with a swan-like grace,” when in reality it is this violation that deems them helpless.

Piñera, as an influential writer of the time, set the tone for writers of the Revolution to express their sentiments of disillusion in similar approaches of feminizing, sexualizing and observing the violation of the Island. Edmundo Desnoes exerts his rhetoric into the discourse utilizing feminization of the Island in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* twofold: the way in which he characterizes the physical features of the Island, as well as the gender roles in society as seen through the lens of Sergio – the seductive and exploitative main character. Beginning with Sergio’s objectification of the women in his life, the reader is able to discern how a culture has been developed through an imposition of a patriarchal society. In the beginning of the book after his wife and family left for the United States, he is quick to recover from mourning their departure shown by his attraction to nearly every woman, including his housekeeper Noemí. Desnoes describes Sergio’s desire, “Estoy nervioso porque deseo a Noemí. Acaba de pasar sonriendo ante el marco de la puerta. Quiero meterle mano y no me atrevo. No sé si me rechazará” (Desnoes *Memorias* 27) (“I’m fidgety because I have desires for Noemí. She just went by and smiled through the door. I want to have her and

I don't dare. Maybe she'll turn me down") (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 123). This quote left alone depicts a harmless nervousness derived from a sexual temptation. However, the real reason for the anxiety is revealed moments after when Sergio narrates, "Sería irritante; me vería obligado a despedirla, no verla más, y buscar otra muchacha para limpiar la casa y llevar la ropa a la tintorería y recoger mi cuota de abastecimientos" (Desnoes *Memorias* 27). ("That could be bothersome, would force me to fire her, not see her again, hire someone else to clean the apartment and take my clothes to the laundry and pick up my monthly rations") (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 27). This passage is a representation of an objectification of women as resources simply used for sexual desires and easing the chores of everyday life. It exemplifies very well the gender and class roles that have been inhabited by the Island. Desnoes takes the time to develop the young maid, noting that she "nació en Matanzas y es protestante" (Desnoes *Memorias* 27) (was born in Matanzas and is Protestant) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 123). These two characteristics in conjunction suggest a literary expression of otherness as a rural female Protestant background in a predominantly Catholic and patriarchal society. Sergio finds himself recognizing his judgment and appraisal of women for their 'social class' and their 'sexuality' and blames "la influencia de la revolución: ¡tengo que vigilar mis pensamientos" (Desnoes *Memorias* 42) ("the damned influence of the revolution: I've even got to watch my own thoughts") (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 130). Sergio senses that he has been classifying and judging people and catches himself dehumanizing and reducing them –women in particular– to an object of societal structure.

Despite this recognition, Sergio proceeds with his libidinal drive as a platform for Desnoes to discuss the national culture of the Island. Elena is his newest, young,

lower class, probably poor, sexual attraction that in many ways parallels the cultural progression in Cuba. When first debating the validity of his romantic relations with Elena, he introduces his perspective on women as sought after by men: “la mujer sólo existe durante su juventud; la niña y la vieja no tienen nada que ver con la feminidad que uno desea” (Desnoes *Memorias* 40). (“A woman can only be young, otherwise she’s not a woman; a little girl or an old lady is removed from the femininity we seek”) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 129). The youthful aspects that Sergio marks as the decision-point for engaging with a sexual partner alludes to two things: 1) The ignorance and underdevelopment of the women he seeks— representative of Cuba, and 2) The virility of the culture. The motif of impregnability and fertility of the culture permeates the book:

Me puse a observar las diferentes edades de la mujer. Hay un punto exquisito, entre los treinta y los treinta y cinco años, en que la mujer cubana pasa bruscamente de la madurez a la podredumbre. Son como frutas que se descomponen con una velocidad asombrosa. Con la misma velocidad vertiginosa del sol de la tarde cayendo en el mar (Desnoes *Memorias* 113).

(I began to study carefully the different ages women go through. There is an exquisite point, somewhere between thirty and thirty-five, when Cuban women suddenly pass from ripeness into decay and corruption. Fruits that rot overnight. It’s astonishing. With the giddy speed of the sun plunging into the sea each afternoon) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 165).

Desnoes compares the imagery of the sun rapidly setting after maturing across the sky throughout the day, to that of the narrow window that a Cuban woman remains attractive and fertile. The image depicted implicates the short-span of impressionability and impregnability of the culture due to the extenuating circumstances of a colonial, neo-colonial, and at this point revolutionary historical context. If Sergio is symbolized as the Cuban intellectual existing in the Revolution, then the feminization of the Island

in the manner that Desnoes portrays the passing by of their enticement and ability to stimulate, is a projection of the Island and the underdevelopment or difficulty to contribute towards a culture. The present transition of society amidst the Revolution is experimental and to a certain extent unpredictable, and as such takes a toll on the civilization especially as an intellectual attempting to carve space for expressive discourse. As referenced in the prior section, Sergio is an extension of Desnoes as an existential character, which leads to Rafael Rojas analysis that:

[Sergio] Malabre o Desnoes – la ambivalencia entre autor y personaje se vuelve en los pasajes más filosóficos o ideológicos de la novela todo un derroche de ironía – desplaza esa caracterización del subdesarrollo de la mentalidad de Elena a la cultura nacional de la Isla. Es así como la novela se acerca a la formulación de una psicología e, incluso, una antropología del subdesarrollo, en la que varios tópicos de la caracterología nacional... se incorporan a una crítica de la cultura popular por parte de las elites intelectuales revolucionarias (Rojas 47).

([Sergio] Malabre or Desnoes –The ambivalence between author and character has led to the profusion of irony in the novel that have stemmed from the more philosophical or ideological passages – this serves to move the characterization of the underdeveloped mentality of Elena to the national culture of the Island. Thus, the novel approaches the formulation of a psychology, and even an anthropology, of underdevelopment, in which various topics of national characterology join a critique of popular culture by the revolutionary intellectual elites)

The idea of this underdeveloped culture projected by the qualities of a seduced, sexualized and degraded feminine figure in the book denote the contextual factors in place that have achieved such a difficult space for the intellectuals of the Island. Elena's role in society as seen through the lens of a bourgeois writer depicts the already established gender and socio-economic roles– and Sergio's taking advantage of her, while also not gaining fulfillment implies the newness of the Revolution and attempts to portray the effects it has had on the ability to create (Rojas 48). In their first seductive encounter in Sergio's apartment, he anticipates her arrival with uncertainty and a touch

of anxiety wondering what was about to unfold, “me asusté un poco cuando vi que se demoraba. Esperé tratando de ver el apartamento como ella lo vería al entrar” (Desnoes *Memorias* 41) (“I was a bit frightened that she wouldn’t come. She didn’t appear for a while. I waited, trying to visualize the apartment as she would see it when she walked in”) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 129). The nervousness can be attributed to the prospect of the unknown, which in the case of Sergio is a younger woman entering his home, and for Desnoes the understanding of socialism and notion of a new societal structure. Similarly, envisioning the apartment through the eyes of Elena is an honest conjecture of what the Island will be for a writer in this underdeveloped and transitional era. The build up of the scene leads to an interesting embrace:

Entré a la cocina para preparar un poco de café. Cuando salí se había quitado los zapatos y el ajustador. Ella me besó primero, estaba desnuda bajo el vestido, pero no se me entregó por completo. No insistí porque la vi muy nerviosa. Empezó a repetir ‘me voy’ a cada tres minutos y a decirme que su madre tenía confianza absoluta en ella, que por eso la dejaba salir sola; otra frase que repetía mucho era ‘si mi madre me viera’. No quise forzar la situación y subimos a ver los zapatos y los vestidos de Laura (Desnoes, 41).

(I went to the kitchen to make some coffee. When I came out she’d taken off her shoes and her bra. She kissed me first and I found out she was naked under her dress, but she refused to give in completely. I didn’t insist because I could see she was very nervous. She began to repeat ‘I’m leaving’ every two or three minutes, and explain how her mother trusted her completely, ‘that’s why she let’s me go out alone’; and she also kept on repeating ‘if my mother could only see me now.’ I didn’t want to force my way in and we went up to the bedroom to look at Laura’s shoes and dresses) (Desnoes, 129-130).

The speed of the situation is addressed with the casual acceleration from coffee to undressing and then kissing in a matter of moments. Although Elena was very swift to disrobe illustrating an enthusiasm, her tentativeness to “give in” suggests that there is a lack of experience that denotes her ignorance of sexual matters. As the furniture

storeowner and representative of the bourgeoisie, Sergio is cautious and unclear of how to treat the situation. Laura and the rest of his family that emigrated for the United States are clear examples of *capital flight*. Surmised by Aviva Chomsky, *capital flight* is the turning to foreign investment and departure of money towards ventures overseas “if a revolutionary government starts to limit the ability to make a profit— by raising wages or placing legal restrictions on businesses” (Chomsky 49). More pertinent to Desnoes’ argument is the concept of *social capital flight*, characterized by “the formerly privileged classes, who generally have high levels of education, skills, business contacts, and other forms of what social scientists call *social capital*,” whom subsequently emigrate the country “when they see their privileges evaporating,” and space to utilize their status and experience diminishing (Chomsky 49). Therefore, as a supposed intellectual with what would be considered *social capital*, (and even simply capital represented by the material goods of “shoes and dresses” that Laura left behind), the indecisiveness, inexperience and ignorance that Elena exudes symbolizes the condition of the Island. The scene portrays the transgression of the Revolution and instillation of a socialist economy that has entrusted the lower class – “su madre tenía confianza absoluta en ella” (her mother trusted her completely) – that are even beneficiaries from the system in a number of ways; in the most fundamental comparison, taking from the upper echelon and redistributing. The reference to ‘her mother,’ can be interpreted as the antecessors of the Island who lived under the colonial, neo-colonial and dictatorial regimes. The repetition of the phrase, however, creates an awe-struck impression of the ensuing reality of liberties, leaving the reader wondering if Elena is capable of handling such responsibilities. This imposes a reflective rhetoric,

pondering if the Island could see what it has become, what would it say? The portrayal of the physical Island and its feminization tells us that *disillusionment* would be the answer.

For Antonio Benítez Rojo, the discontentedness illustrated by Edmundo Desnoes feminization of the Island exhibits a repetitiveness to Cuba (as well as other Caribbean Islands) which align with his discussion of Chaos theory. Desnoes utilizes Sergio and his smug conformability with his continued (and ultimately meaningless) relationship with Elena to simultaneously display change and sameness on the Island. Sergio narrates:

Elena se puede convertir en un hábito: estoy acostumbrado a tener una mujer siempre a mi lado. Una busca siempre la repetición de todo lo agradable que ha probado en la vida: ahí está la trampa. Sufre cuando no lo tiene y so lo tiene el miedo a perderlo es de espanto (Desnoes, 45).

(Elena has become a habit: I'm getting used to having a woman beside me all the time. In life you come to expect the repetition of anything that has given you pleasure: that's where the trap lies. You suffer when you can't have it, and when you do have it, the fear of losing it is awful) (Desnoes, 131).

Elena is a clear representation of the Island and its ability to develop a national culture. The repetition that Sergio comments on brings about a disconcerted tone as he recognizes a point of perpetual discomfort— with or without “it” (in this case Elena), the result is the same. In a review of Benítez Rojo's *The Repeating Island*, Edna Aizenberg summarizes:

In nature order and disorder are not the antithesis of each other, but rather function as mutually generative phenomena. Within the loops and whorls of constant change there are complex if often unperceptible recurring patterns. These repetitions with a difference constitute the subject matter of chaos studies (Aizenberg 186)



Benítez Rojo argues that the Caribbean is predestined to the repetitions that come along with *chaos* theory. As we had discussed in the prior section about the Plantation, and because of the nature of the established economic system, people “in charge” and different governing powers could change, but ultimately the structure would remain the same. Similarly, “the meta-archipelago [is]: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes” (Benítez Rojo 11). Amidst the changes of a Revolution that brought about popular mobilization and a redistribution of resources to foster an egalitarian (and eventually recognized as communist) economy, the nature of the Island has disallowed a true modernization and societal development. The repetition of the Island with regards to *chaos* theory is expressed in disillusionment. Benítez Rojo claims that peoples of a culture that are suppressed by extremely differing ideologies in other parts of the world would undergo an *apocalyptic* process: “In Chicago a beaten soul says: ‘I can’t take it any more,’ and gives himself up to drugs,” whereas “in Havana, he would say: ‘The thing to do is not die,’ or perhaps: ‘Here I am, fucked but happy’” (Benítez 10). Sergio exhibits the same philosophy of the latter example of the dejected Cuban with his disappointment in Elena: “yo esperaba más de Elena. Pensé que era mucho más compleja e interesante... Soy un iluso y un subdesarrollado: lo terrible es que lo sé” (Desnoes *Memorias* 44) (“I expected more from Elena. She let me down. I thought she would be much more tangled up and interesting... I’m deluded and underdeveloped: and what’s even worse, I know it”) (Desnoes *Inconsolable* 131). Even though Sergio is self-aware and understands that he is stuck in a culturally and socially underdeveloped and improbable society, there is no plan of actions to address his

predicament, but simply chalks it up to the nature of the Island and succumbs to its repetitive nature.

Desnoes continues throughout the book in his characterization of women as an analogy for the condemnation of the Island and the inability to form a society that is equal for all. Elena, as we have noted, is decidedly underdeveloped and violated as a representation of the cultural identity in Cuba. Laura, his former wife, is described as needing a lifestyle inaccessible in Cuba and only existent in the Western world. Sergio even describes his mother and first lover, Rogelia, respectively as opposing forces of sophistication on one hand, and stupidity and ignorance on the other. This is a feminized expression of the class struggle, in which Desnoes sees no utopian scenario benefiting both sides. Sergio is torn: “sólo me siento totalmente cómodo con un libro, mirando un cuadro, en el cine; pero todo eso es de mentira. La mujer es un libro, una película, y un cuadro, pero de verdad” (Desnoes, 109) (“I can only feel totally comfortable with a book, looking at a painting, at the movies: but all that is a lie. A woman is a book, a picture, and a painting, but flesh-and-blood real”) (Desnoes, 163). The book, painting, and movie are all things that Sergio/Desnoes have addressed throughout the novel that are artistic platforms to take the individual to another place. He notes that the real thing, Cuba, as an Island, is the best. It is alluring, seductive, and has incredible features with an abundance of promise, but at the same time can leave the individual unsatisfied from the limitations of its potential.

The manner in which Edmundo Desnoes describes the bicephalous nature of the Island amidst the Revolution is congruent to Antón Arrufat’s comparison of the Island and its culture to ‘El Coro’ in his play *Los siete contra Tebas* (1968). The work is a

satirical recreation of the famous ancient Greek tragedy Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes*, with the main characters representing certain aspects of Cuban historical and cultural components. The play's "thinly disguised criticism of the lack of freedom and the unfulfilled promises of the revolutionary government" received the national award for literature given out by the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC), and subsequent criticism and condemnation for its counterrevolutionary attacks (Menton 138). The subversive elements that were unacceptable to the UNEAC was likely its creation of analogy between revolutionary Cuba and Cuba's relationship to the United States, that are detested in the declaration preceding the published play:

"Todos los elementos que el imperialismo yanqui quisiera que fuesen realidades cubanas, están en esta obra, desde el pueblo aterrado ante el invasor que se acerca, (los mercenarios de Playa Girón estaban convencidos que iban a encontrar ese terror popular abriéndoles todos los caminos), hasta la angustia por la guerra que los habitantes de la ciudad, (el Coro), describen como la suma del horror posible, dándonos implícito el pensamiento de que lo mejor sería evitar ese horror de una lucha fratricida, de una guerra entre hermanos" (Arrufat 14).

(All of the elements that Yankee Imperialism wanted were Cuban realities in this work, from the people terrified as their invader approaches their village (the mercenaries of the Bay of Pigs Invasion were convinced that they would find this popular horror opening up all roads), to the anguish of the war the inhabitants of the city (the Chorus) describe as the gravest horror possible, giving implicit thought that it would be best to avoid the horror of a fratricidal struggle, a war between brothers)

The play's drama includes two brothers, Etéocles and Polinice, and their struggle for power in the village of Thebes. The brothers were given the orders by their father to trade off governing the city every year. However, Etéocles has taken the city out of turn, which provokes his exiled brother Polinice to return for vengeance. Etéocles is widely regarded as a metaphor for the transition of government during the Revolution in Cuba, while Polinice as seen in the quote above is representative of the United States' neo-

colonial powers that culminated in the battle at *Playa Girón* (Menton 140). The significance of ‘el Coro’ arises as the drama unfolds and it is clear that their status as citizens of the village under siege– and the citizens of revolutionary Cuba – is one of impotence, uncertainty and disillusionment.

The juxtaposition that Antón Arrufat utilizes, with the Chorus speaking all together against the Chorus speaking separately, emphasizes the parody of the allegorical recreation that makes the reader think about how the Revolution has in reality consumed power instead of providing the capacity for the individual to thrive more justly in an egalitarian economy. It cannot go unnoticed that the Chorus as the citizens of Thebes are the women of the village, and Arrufat applies patriarchal gender roles as such. Arrufat stylistically has created two different forms of dialogue of the Chorus, which completely determines their attitudes, beliefs and overall faith in the village when they are talking together versus their individual dialogue. This allows insight not only into the patriarchal society, but also the lack of individual rights and access to liberties under Etéocles. The initial example of the adversity that they face in correlation with the Chorus breaking apart to speak as individuals is when they are concerned with the ensuing attacks from the exiled warriors:

IV: Ay, amigas, ¿quién nos salvará? / ¿Quién acudirá a nuestra súplica?”  
(Arrufat 34-35)

(IV: Oh, friends, who is going to save us? / Who will come to answer our prayer?)

This initial point of agitation and concern is only expressed through the fourth member of the Chorus, and leads to a subsequent interaction between Etéocles and the Chorus as a whole in attempt to reunite them:

Etéocles: Oigan. Se los ruego.

El Coro: Dilo cuanto antes.

Etéocles: Les pido silencio.

El Coro (*Uniéndose*): Callaremos.

Etéocles: Les pido que no teman.

El Coro: No temeremos.

Etéocles: Les pido que se unan a nosotros.

El Coro: Nuestra suerte será la suerte de todos” (Arrufat 39-40).

(Etéocles: Listen. I plead with you. / Chorus: Say it as quickly as possible. / Etéocles: I order your silence. / Chorus (*Joining together*): We will be quiet. / Etéocles: I order you not to be afraid. / Chorus: We will not fear. / Etéocles: I order that you unite with us. / Chorus: Our fate will be the fate of all).

This passage displays Etéocles as the clearly authoritative leader who is trying to reinstall, or rather, install the faith and belief into the Chorus. The reader can infer this to be an allusion to the ideologies and practices of the Revolution, where there was an emphasis on popular mobilization and participation from all the citizens. The mesmerized and almost robotic tone that is sensed when the Chorus speaks together obeying the orders creates the irony in which the women are having trouble buying into the words of Etéocles. In reality he is not calming them or even convincing them, yet ordering their attention and actions. The final line of the passage provides an understanding of the existing patriarchy and absence of individuality; the women are *supposedly* in agreement with Etéocles in that their luck will be the fate of the city's. However, the reality is that they do not have any impact on what will happen now or in the future. This analysis is reinforced when the Chorus separates again after Etéocles leaves the scene:

“El Coro / *Se divide. Dos mujeres cantan un himno...* / III: Intento obedecerte, y sin embargo / la ansiedad no abandona mi pecho. / IV: Otrora una extraña luz al futuro” (Arrufat 41-42).

(The Chorus / *They separate themselves. Two women sing a hymn... / III:*  
I intend to obey him, yet still / the anxiety in my chest won't go away. /  
IV: It sheds a strange light on the future).

This quote unveils a couple of points worth reading into. First, the author projects the Chorus as impotent because of their only option available being to blindly follow despite the uneasiness exhibited by these individuals. Second, the uncertainty and discomfort illustrated is a correlation to the disillusionment with the possibilities that Arrufat expresses and the reason for which the play was denounced and not able to be performed in Cuba until very recently in 2007 (Tennant *Interview*).

The play unfolds as Etéocles continues his attempts to compose the citizens and prepare for defending the village with the other Seis Adalides (Six Leaders). The rising action of the story is drawn out as Los Espías (The Spies) describe the warriors that wait at each door surrounding the city of Thebes. The play's tragic nature is revealed when the audience and Etéocles finally realize that it is Polinice behind the seventh door. In their encounter, Polinice at first offers a peaceful treaty that would result in Etéocles readmitting his brother to the terms of their father's agreement and allowing him to lead. However, Etéocles demonstrates his stubbornness as he rejects the offer, leading Polinice to criticize his form of governance: "¡Tú detentas un poder que no pertenece del todo! / ¿Qué dijiste en Tebas para ocultar su traición?" (Arrufat 75) (You hold a power that does not pertain to everyone! / What did you say in Thebes to conceal your betrayal?). Visualizing the play through Antonio Benítez Rojo's theories on both *rhythm* and *chaos* aforementioned, Polinice diagnoses that Etéocles has established a certain order by the formation of disorder, and certain justices arising from alternative injustices; this embodies the notion of "the flux of an unknowable feedback machine," that creates a "paradoxical space, in which one has the illusion of experiencing a

totality, [and] there appear to be no repressions or contradictions” (Benítez Rojo 16-17). However, it is when the battle of Thebes commences and the men leave to fight that the Chorus is given the opportunity to speak transparently about the past, current condition and hopes for the future.

The dichotomy of the Chorus engaging in dialogue together contrasting with their separated and individual verses is seen stylistically throughout the play and allows the reader to discern a theme of regret and uncertainty. At this moment of grave suspense, the women break off into what functions as a soliloquy:

I: Amigas, yo conozco la guerra.

IV: Amigas, yo conozco la guerra.

...

V: Ya era de noche cuando todos / los barcos quedaron vacíos, / y mi hijo no había bajado.

I: Y mi hijo no había bajado.

II: El hijo que me costó tanto / tiempo criar.

IV: Como un arbolito del campo, / como una oveja,

III: como todo cuanto vale en la vida ...

IV: Yo lo dejé partir

III: Y ahora, / si de pronto volviera de la muerte,

V: no tendría / el valor de mirarlo a la cara.

I: Amigas, yo conozco la guerra (Arrufat 89-92).

(I: Friends, I know war. / IV: Friends, I know war... / V: It was already nighttime when all / the boats were empty, / and my son had not gotten off. / I: And my son had not gotten off. / II: The son that I gave all my time / to raise. / IV: Like a little tree in the field, / like a sheep, / III: Like everything valuable in life... / IV: I left him their to depart. / And now, / if he were to return suddenly from death, / V: I would not have / the courage to look him in the face. I: Friends, I know war).

The repetition of the phrase “I know war” is instrumental in understanding the sentiments of the Chorus in this passage; there is a repetitive nature of the Island in

which the citizens have seen similar crises, interruptions, and fluxes before— and now the answer (future) is staring at them in the face and they are not able to face the consequences. It is important to note the tone of regret and helplessness expressed by the Chorus having left their children to be deported for war without optimism of return. I believe this takes on two meanings: not only are their sentiments representative of the patriarchal society in which women are devoid of a number of predetermined roles and subject to a specific character, but also the cyclical situation they find themselves in is evidenced in the disillusionment that the play thematizes. When The Spies return with the ultimate announcement of how the City of Thebes has been “saved,” there is a bittersweet reality that sets in amongst The Chorus. United as one they discuss the tragic resolution to one of the most controversial pieces of literature in Cuban history, which ends in the brutal killing of each other:

Doble infortunio, soledad doble.  
Ay, qué extraña noche: mezcla  
la desdicha a la alegría,  
la soberbia a la justicia,  
nos deja con agradecimiento y lástima (Arrufat 102).

(Doubly unfortunate, double solitude. / Oh, what a strange night: mixed with / misfortune and joy, / pride and justice, / it has left us feeling gratitude and shame).

Here we see an emotional dichotomy expressed due to the “saving” of Thebes at the expense of the two brothers’ lives. This is a representation of the noble ideological stance that the Revolution disseminated on the Island, yet conversely is also there to criticize its downfalls that are seemingly going to extend itself for the, then, unforeseeable future. Or, in this instance Etéocles could represent the duality of the situation. The revolutionary government had created a popular mobilization and many



functioning services centralized around *voluntarismo* and is better than control from the outside. However, the disillusionment remains true and thus a bitter-sweet notion of idea against execution. Even here, the Chorus speaking together seems to be less pessimistic, and more matter-of-fact in their tone. It is then that the reader would agree with Michel de Certeau in his theoretical portrayal of the consumers and citizens of a society as it aligns with Arrufat's portrayal of the Chorus. The everyday action of the individual includes being in civilization and consuming the surroundings in a number of ways. This individual is able to internalize its surroundings, and their activities and reproductions based on their current environment contribute to that of a larger culture (de Certeau xii). When the Chorus is alone and able to speak freely and as individuals without the presence and ordering of Etéocles, their thoughts are perceptible and genuine. However, when they are met by a larger (in this case patriarchal) force that guides their thoughts, they are portrayed as mechanic, obedient and helpless. It is in this analysis that the feminization of the Island as projected by the Chorus exhibits a larger message than gender-role, but adds to the belief that the established order and new governance, albeit having solid ideological forethought, is not in reality conducive to a more equitable society and culturally creative environment.

The characterization of the Island as being feminized has projected the predisposition of Cuba as a patriarchal and penetrated society, all the way to the more contemporary issue of disillusionment of the Revolution. Reinaldo Arenas feminizes the Island, including both eroticizing/sexualizing and the function of an Oedipal complex in his autobiography *Antes Que Anochezca*, as a way of portraying his divergent values within the existing parameters of Cuba. The work has a reflective and even

contemplative tone in large part due to the distance and time that separated Arenas from the majority of his remembrances. Beginning with his childhood, he addresses his development as “other” early on in the text:

“Yo tiritaba mientras mis tías y mi madre ponían los platos sin preocuparse demasiado por mí. Siempre he creído que mi familia, incluyendo a mi madre, me consideraba un ser extraño, inútil, atolondrado, chiflado o enloquecido; fuera del contexto de sus vidas. Seguramente tenían razón” (Arenas 36).

(“My mother set the table without paying much attention to me. I always thought that my family, including my mother, saw me as a weird creature, useless, confused, or crazy; a being outside the framework of their lives. They were probably right”) (Koch 17).

At first glance this appears to be a mere expression of neglect that Arenas cared to share as an influential element in his upbringing. However, the manipulation of his mother within the text, stating that “incluyendo a mi madre” (even my mother) was a culprit, impresses an “otherness” onto himself in a deliberate manner. His mother’s dejection as “fuera del contexto de sus vidas” (outside the framework of their lives), functions to symbolize his mother as Cuba in its societal and cultural sphere. We have addressed the difficulty of a writer throughout the Revolution and eventual *quinquenio gris*, which of course was not made easier as a homosexual. Writers (and other citizens) were either condemned to internal exile, or expelled, due to the “autoritarismo y la homofobia de la burocracia cultural de la Isla” (Rojas 29) (“authoritarianism and the homophobia from the bureaucracy of the Island”). This passage can be characterized as an anti-Oedipal complex, where instead of Arenas expressing intimate feelings for his mother, he rather utilizes femininity of the Island to denote its repulsion– or, at least the Island’s repulsion of Arenas.

Reverting back to the prior section on the incarceration and entrapment of the Island as perceived by Arenas, we know that the Sea plays a major role in the sexualizing of the Island. As a symbol for ‘the brink’ of Cuba, Arenas displays imagery of an oasis that is the closest feature to the edge of the Island. Other writers such as Virgilio Piñera, Edmundo Desnoes and others historically reference Cuba’s impregnability and violation due to the engulfing of the Island by the Sea and the varying powers and cultures that have imposed themselves from that access point. Conversely for Arenas, the beach and the Sea are correlated with his erotic adventures purposefully due to the representation of the locale as a portal to a Western society and accepting culture. Arenas goes as far to say that it was inspiration for his novel *Otra vez el mar [The Sea Once Again]*:

“porque el mar era realmente lo que más nos erotizaba; aquel mar del trópico lleno de adolescentes extraordinarios, de hombres que se bañaban a veces desnudos o con ligeras trusas. Llegar al mar, ver el mar, era una enorme fiesta, donde uno sabía que siempre algún amante anónimo nos aguardaba entre las olas. A veces realizábamos el amor debajo el agua” (Arenas 126-127).

(“because the sea really provided us with the greatest sexual excitement, that tropical sea full of extraordinary young men who swam either in the nude or in bikinis. To be by the ocean and look at the sea was always a wonderful feast; we knew that somewhere in those waves an anonymous lover would be waiting”) (Koch 100-101).

From this passage I discern a hint of hyperbole in the extremity and openness of the erotic afternoons at the beach. The lust-laden adventures in the waves of the Ocean are representative of the brink of the Island and the only place for such an oppressed community to exist. However, Arenas makes it clear that in this space there is a consensus of the events taking place by all parties, as denoted by the anonymity of

many of the men engaging in the erotic acts. Michel de Certeau explores the creation of such a space in a culture through his theoretical discourse on “local authorities”:

“By a paradox that is only apparent, the discourse that makes people believe is the one that takes away what it urges them to believe in, or never delivers what it promises. Far from expressing a void or describing a lack, it creates such. It makes room for a void. In that way, it opens up clearings; it ‘allows’ a certain play within a system of defined places. It ‘authorizes’ the production of an area of free play (*Spielraum*) on a checkerboard that analyzes and classifies identities. It makes places habitable” (de Certeau 105-106).

Arenas is doing exactly this in his creation of an erotic oasis on the Island— by communicating this rhetoric he is abiding by the societal spaces that have already been established and inhabited in a contrasting order to the area that Arenas has produced as homoerotic. As the ‘other,’ in this scenario, it is a clever utilization of literature to ensure discourse plays into the paradox de Certeau describes, and is able to “authorize” the formulation of this space. Even yet a clearer example of a sexualized Sea is when:

“En la azotea del Morro, un joven rubio que tenía unos veinte años, un día se sacó el miembro y comenzó a masturbarse mirando el mar; me hizo una seña para que me acercara, pero yo no me atreví; solo lo miré y él me miró y así eyaculó, entregando toda su vitalidad al oleaje” (Arenas 235).

(“One day, on the sun roof of El Morro, a young man of about twenty took out his penis and started to masturbate looking at the sea; he beckoned me, but I did not dare, I only looked at him and he looked at me, and he ejaculated, releasing his vitality to the sea”) (Koch 211).

The imagery of a rooftop view (from El Morro prison) of the Sea as the catalyst for an utmost virile climax enhances the rhetoric of the significance of the symbol of the fringe of the Island. As mentioned, this projection leads in a different direction than that of feminization discussed earlier. Opposed to the aforementioned violated, penetrated, and impregnated society, the eroticism projects a sterile and impregnable characterization of the Island itself, while portraying the Sea and the ideologies that it embodies as the

stimulating feature. These examples draw a connotation to the cultural impregnability of the Island and the liberties exhibited beyond the parameterized borders that the Sea and its abyss sit just beyond.

To delve further into the Island and Arenas' sentiments towards its progression, we will turn back to the anti-Oedipal complex as a way for the author to depict a sameness as well as the difficulty in detachment. Once he was freed from prison in early 1976 he was well aware of the cultural oppression of an extreme stature over the last decade. The author promptly revisits the place of his childhood, Holguín, where he grew up, discovered certain identities about himself, but also where he was an active youth in the Revolution. Arenas describes his visit:

“en pleno verano fui a ver a mi madre a Holguín. Cuando llegué a mi barrio parecía que nada habían cambiado desde los años cincuenta y allí, frente a la puerta de la casa de mi abuelo, estaba mi madre barriendo como siempre” (Arenas 252-253).

(“In the middle of summer I went to see my mother in Holguín. When I arrived in my neighborhood, it seemed that nothing had changed since the fifties, and there, in front of my grandfather's house, was my mother, sweeping as usual”) (Koch 229).

The diction Arenas selects in this passage denotes the disillusionment and stagnancy he feels in the progression of Cuba. He references “the fifties” purposefully, because of 1959 being the culminating triumph of Revolution. However, his mother is still standing at the porch sweeping “como siempre” (as usual). He projects his mother as the disappointing shortcomings in Cuba that depict a similar socio-economic standing and zero change in day-to-day actions. The ultimate anti-Oedipal statement comes in Arenas' clearest analogy of Cuba to his mother in the entire work: “Siempre pensé que, en mi caso, lo mejor era vivir lejos de mi madre para no hacerla sufrir; tal vez todo hijo debe abandonar a su madre y vivir su propia vida” (Arenas 221) (“I always thought that,

in my case, it was best for me to live far away from my mother so that I would not make her suffer; perhaps every son should leave his mother and live his own life”) (Koch 197). Arenas cites the differences in aspirations, conflicting selfish concepts, mothers that want to see their son to grow up how they want to have molded them, and the son struggling to detach and branch out as the deduction behind his reasoning. In any case, it is said with a lamenting tone which perhaps suggests Arenas wishes he was wise enough, or able, to emigrate before his eventual exodus by Mariel Boatlift. The Oedipal-complex is a function often used to display an unresolved desire of the son for his mother— when in fact in this relationship the relationship has been overbearing leaving the opposite affect of detachment as the most sought after option. A peculiar and most distinct “feminization” of the Island, Arenas portrayal of eroticism and anti-Oedipal suggest the impossibility of a habitable space for him and others in Cuba.

From a pre-revolutionary poet to a post-revolutionary author, the feminization of the Island is projected in a plethora of ways. The phallic representation of an impregnation of economy, society and subsequent affect on culture is depicted through choice diction and strong critical imagery. While the symbolism of women and their comparison to the Island serves to denote the cultural underdevelopment, inequality, disillusionment, and even desire to exile. A tone of exhaustion and indifference permeates the texts in a critical manner— which is fitting, because years of violation, disruption, assimilation and let down have a taxing affect that is reproduced by these authors.

## **Conclusions: An Underdeveloped National Culture**

Throughout this investigative look into the heart of the Revolution as it pertains to literary expression and cultural development, Virgilio Piñera, Antón Arrufat, Reinaldo Arenas and Edmundo Desnoes with the theoretical and contextual direction of Antonio Benítez Rojo, Michel de Certeau and others, I have interpreted the feelings of an overarching lack of space on the Island for these writers to contribute artistically. The information that we can gather from this thesis concludes twofold: 1) The writers of this study – that projected the Island as incarcerating that have led to inferences of constricting socio-political condemnation, as well as the textual feminization of the Island that has determined the predisposed formation of culture and the (then) current perverseness to ‘the other’ – all hold the notion that the Island’s historical and inherent underdevelopment has contributed to the inability to leave room for cultural expression, unity, critique, etc., common of a more developed society. 2) The Revolution saw many waves of emigration due to economic transition, oppression, ideological differences, and familial ties, but with regards to Cuban authors, poets, and playwrights, it is this period of literature we have analyzed that sparked a contemporary rhetoric of what it means to be a Cuban author and/or have a national identity and national literature.

It is easy to turn to Edmundo Desnoes’ *Memorias del subdesarrollo* as an obvious criticism of the underdeveloped society and culture as seen in the title of the novel. However, it is evident from the close readings that all the authors represented in this paper illustrate a perception of underdevelopment, and the cultural significance that has. Rafael Rojas comments that:

En la novela *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, Edmundo Desnoes procedía, como Wright Mills, Sartre y Fanon, en busca de una antropología cultural del subdesarrollo. Sin embargo, a pesar de que ese ejercicio antropológico era practicado por un escritor revolucionario, desde el lugar y el momento de la Revolución, en su discurso reaparecían no pocos tópicos de la tradición intelectual ilustrada, liberal, positivista y eugenésica que, desde Europa, había identificado el mundo latinoamericano con la barbarie. La criatura subdesarrollada, según Desnoes, era, ante todo, un sujeto precariamente sentimental, con <<alegrías y sufrimientos primitivos y directos que no han sido trabajados y enredados por la cultura>> (Rojas 46).

(In the novel *Inconsolable Memories*, Edmundo Desnoes proceeds as Wright Mills, Sartre, and Fanon, looking for a cultural anthropology of underdevelopment. However, even though the anthropological exercise was practice by a revolutionary writer, from the time and place of the Revolution, in this reappearing discourse there are few topics of enlightened, liberal, positivist and eugenic intellectual tradition, and that from Europe he identified the Latin American world with barbarism. The underdeveloped creature, according to Desnoes, was above all precariously emotional, with “primitive and direct joys that weren’t yet worked out and untangled by [a developed] culture”).

The idea that Desnoes’ main character in his return to Cuba (just as Desnoes did) is surrounded by emotionally incompetent people, as well as his inability to continue writing and produce any literary thoughts are a testament to the underdevelopment of the culture. As proof of the existence of this critique prior to the Revolution as well is Piñera’s belief of dependency and imitation of the Western world on the Island. In “La Isla en Peso,” “he recounts arriving at an Afro-Cuban dance where:

Solamente el europeo leía las meditaciones cartesianas.

El baile y la isla rodeada de agua por todas partes:

pluma de flamencos, espinas de pargo, ramos de albahaca,  
semilla de aguacate.

La nueva solemnidad de esta isla.

¡País mío, tan joven, no sabes definir! (Piñera 67-71)

(The European merely reads Cartesian meditations

The dance and the island completely surrounded by water:



flamingo feathers, spines of snappers, sprigs of basil, seeds of avocados.  
The island's new solemnity.

My country, too young to define yourself!) (Weiss 67-71)

This poetic expression of a review of history depicts the youth, innocence, and ultimately underdevelopment of the Island as a condition of being subject to European rule and influence. Piñera would surely concur with Aviva Chomsky in her synopsis of the comparison between *modernization* theorists and *dependency* theorists. The former believe that underdeveloped countries are simply behind schedule, and need to undergo a developmental period of industrialization to catch up to the 'First World,' standards. Contrarily, the latter interpret the underdevelopment in relation to the interconnectivity between the First World (colonial) and underdeveloped country at hand— with which Piñera would agree (Chomsky 46). Antón Arrufat and Reinaldo Arenas both exhibit frustrations and disillusionment. Arrufat notes the attempted institutionalization of the culture, but suggests that further restricted the already underdeveloped culture (Tennant). This leads to our next inference with the rhetoric of how this underdeveloped culture determined the discourse of a national literature.

An interesting comment that has led me to ponder the stance that Cuban writers take on the national culture was made by Antón Arrufat, who notes that Heberto Padilla decided to leave after his persecution and subsequent public apology, while Arrufat who was wrapped up in the scenario stayed on the Island (Tennant). The underdevelopment, persecution, censorship, and ultimate lack of space for a cultural accumulation rendered the Island a very difficult place for an author, as we have discussed at length. What we haven't mentioned is their sentiments of the internal exile they were subject to, in comparison with the emigrants who went on to live, and often publish, abroad. As we

have discussed with Virgilio Piñera, he criticized his contemporaries (and the situation at large) for the lack of a national culture because of the impressionability of Western influence and no real stark differentiation within the Island. As we move forward, and the Revolution said goodbye to a number of authors in a Literary Diaspora, the question became: is there a divide between the continental and the abroad Cuban writers? This rhetoric only exists as derived from the *quinquenio gris* and period of literature we have analyzed in this paper, and understanding the difficulty to exist and live a day-to-day life, much less publish anything on the Island.

From the perspective of writers who stayed— whether in favor or against the Revolution— there was a sense of bitterness, angst, and sometimes jealousy for those who left the Island early (1959-62) (Pedraza 318). Ambrosio Fornet goes as far to say “simply that he who left, he who abandoned the country, stopped being Cuban” (Fornet *Diaspora* 256). It is clear that the affect that the Revolution had on its either pushing out or retaining of writers leads to a contentious debate of Cuban national culture. For example, contemporary writers of the next generation of the Revolution such as Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Zoé Valdés hold different criticisms from their contemporaries. Leonardo Padura (b. 1955) poses the question in a relatively recent interview of what it means to be a Cuban writer, and a Cuban writer living in Cuba? He says, regarding his emergence in the literary market in the 1980s (after the *quinquenio gris*):

Fue en el ambiente más favorable de esos años cuando me hice— o comencé hacerme — un escritor cubano que vivía en Cuba, y por vía atmosférica, más que por un proceso de racionalización, fui descubriendo cómo debía enfrentar a la literatura alguien que pretendiera ser aquello en lo que yo me estaba convirtiendo: un escritor cubano que vive en Cuba (Padura)

(It was in the most favorable environment of those years when I did – or started to become – a Cuban writer living in Cuba, and in an atmospheric way, rather than process of rationalization, I was discovering how I should deal with the literature of someone pretending to be that which I was becoming: a Cuban writer living in Cuba)<sup>5</sup>

Clearly embracing the challenge of the time, as a Cuban writer living in Cuba that has had to embrace and emerge out of a period of *extreme* censorship– suggesting that there is a special significance to the cultural identify and national culture of physically being in Cuba as a Cuban writer. Conversely, Zoé Valdés (b. 1959) emigrated to Paris, France, and has achieved success publishing internationally from abroad. Esther Whitfield says that her novels and short stories holds a “contentious” place in literature and certainly “haunted” the writers working domestically in Cuba (Whitfield loc 490). Both authors are widely successful, but it is this rhetoric of a contemporary *cubanidad*, and what are the characteristics in achieving– or being apart of– a national culture that has emerged from the literary period of the Revolution that suffered through the lack of space, constrictions, and underdeveloped culture.

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<sup>5</sup> All translations for Leonardo Padura Fuentes are mine.

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