

Revolution Is Such a Beautiful Word!

Literary Journalism in Castro's Cuba

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The predictable discourse of Cuba's communist news media has occasionally been challenged by literary journalists who have offered some surprisingly rich, and politically uncomfortable, interpretations.

There were a few people in Havana, around the end of the 1980s, who knew who Tom Wolfe was. How they had come to know him is difficult to explain. None of the books written by Wolfe until that time had been published in Cuba. Neither *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* nor *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Neither *The Pump House Gang*, nor *The Right Stuff*, nor, crucially, *The New Journalism*. Yet, some people knew who Tom Wolfe was and were also somewhat knowledgeable about the New Journalism itself. Spanish translations of Wolfe's manifesto had found their way into Castro's Cuba, and some writers, journalists, and university lecturers had read it. Wilfredo Cancio, then a young student at the Faculty of Journalism of the University of Havana, has recalled how he and his classmates got hold around 1987 of a Spanish edition of *The New Journalism* on which they put a cover with the uninviting title *Minutes of the Congress of the Union of Cuban Journalists*.¹ At the time, being in possession of a foreign book was still something most people would wisely not boast about. Contemporary American writers were not the kind of authors the ideologues of the Party would recommend to the younger generation.² And literary journalism, those ideologues would have said, was most likely another dangerous foreign creation that had nothing to do with journalism in a socialist society.³

Someone in the Party must have changed his or her mind, because a Cuban edition of *The New Journalism* was published in 1991. Almost at the same time, the country's readers were presented with a Cuban edition of Oriana Fallaci's *Interview with History*. Both books instantly became compulsory reading among the Faculty of Journalism of the University of Havana and the Department of Journalism of the University of Oriente in Santiago de Cuba, the only two schools of journalism open in the country at the time. Even though both were abridged versions of the originals, they still had enough power to change the way a new generation of journalists understood the art of writing. Literary journalism is no longer treated with suspicion in Cuba. Quite the contrary, there are frequent calls for journalists to write in a more lively and creative way.⁴ But the ideological and institutional structures of the Cuban press stifle the sporadic attempts by a few daring journalists to experiment with new narrative modalities and literary styles. While Cuba's profound social, economic, and cultural crisis provides formidable material for literary and investigative journalism—there are many fine journalists and writers willing to tell the stories of this *fin du régime*—very few, if any, of those stories ever appear in Cuban newspapers or magazines, which Fidel Castro's own friend, Gabriel García Márquez, famously said were “seemingly created to hide rather than show” the country's reality.⁵ This article examines the travails of some exemplary Cuban literary journalists; the institutional, political, and ideological obstacles they had to overcome; and the lasting legacy of their work. The examination indicates that literary journalism will not find a space in the Cuban press as it currently exists if its occasional practitioners insist not only in writing beautifully, but also in challenging the Party's preferred interpretation of the country's life—its past and its uncertain future.

THE STYLE OF THE REVOLUTION

Literary journalism existed in Cuba long before Fidel Castro took power in 1959. During the first half of the twentieth century, Cuba had a vigorous and politically diverse press.⁶ Many novelists, essayists, and poets were also reporters, art critics, and columnists in national and local publications.⁷ There were numerous examples of narrative literary journalism⁸ in Cuban publications during the pre-revolutionary period, between the inauguration of the Republic of Cuba (1902) and Castro's victory. The most remarkable of these is probably Enrique de la Osa's reportages in the celebrated “En Cuba” (In Cuba) section of *Bohemia*, the country's oldest and most influential current affairs magazine. De la Osa, an avant-garde poet in his youth who in his maturity dedicated himself entirely to journalism, reported some of the most sensational stories of his time in a style that was thrillingly melodramatic and

unconcerned with journalistic conventions. More than classic reportages,⁹ some of his stories resembled the popular *radionovelas* (radio soaps) of that time, with bigger-than-life characters trapped in intricate plots of corruption, betrayal, and murder.

Castro's revolution interrupted the development of literary and investigative journalism in Cuba.¹⁰ Most of the leading publishers, editors, columnists, and reporters of the pre-1959 press left the country: the journalism of socialist Cuba was therefore born with a cultural deficit that has still not been overcome. The place of some of the country's finest writers, who fled from Castro or broke up with him after a brief dalliance with his regime, was taken by Party cadres and young revolutionaries, who filled with a squalid prose¹¹ the pages of the scarce newspapers and magazines that continued to run in the 1960s and 1970s. The majority of these early socialist journalists came from the urban working class or from small towns in the countryside and had only a basic or at best incomplete literary education and a very vague, Party propaganda-filtered idea of the world outside Cuba.¹² In the schools of Journalism, professional education was focused on the ideological functions of Communist media, not on technique.¹³ But the most important factor preventing the development of literary or investigative journalism in Cuba was the imposition of strict limits on all forms of representation and interpretation of the country's social reality. Castro's infamous dictum "Inside the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing" defined the cultural and informative policy of the new government, and was interpreted and applied arbitrarily by cultural commissars and newspaper editors. Most literary authors, even those who sympathized with Castro's regime, stayed away from State-owned, Party-controlled newspapers and magazines that favored the dry explicitness of propaganda and were hostile to ideological ambiguity and formal experimentation.¹⁴

As early as 1964, the country's President, the Communist Osvaldo Dorticós, lectured the Union of Cuban Journalists about the need to eliminate "vices of style and work." Dorticós said that it was not licit "with the pretext to avoid a grey, boring, tedious press, to forget fundamental canons of the revolutionary journalism and appeal to cheap sensationalism."¹⁵ Still a decade later, the congress of the Communist Party called the country's journalists to "pay special attention to the development of a legitimate revolutionary and socialist style in the use of different forms and techniques of expression," to avoid "sensationalism, superficiality, the imitation of the decadent trends of the capitalist world," and not to make "any concession to bad taste and vulgarity."¹⁶ Successive congresses of the Union of Cuban Journalists have called for that elusive socialist style of journalism whose practitioners were memo-

rably defined in 1980 by Fidel's younger brother Raúl Castro as "reproducers of ideology."¹⁷ Style, however, is still seen as a means to produce a more politically effective message, not to open the representation of social reality to multiple, even conflicting, interpretations. In January 2012, Raúl Castro, who in 2006 had succeeded Fidel as Cuba's leader, declared that the press had to encourage an "exchange of opinions," but not "in a bourgeois style, full of sensationalism and lies, but with proven objectivity."¹⁸ Style was never the problem: deprived of the possibility to produce their own free interpretation of Cuba's past and present, and harshly penalized every time they did it, neither literary authors nor journalists could have produced journalism of any quality. All journalistic genres and modalities (news, features, interviews, reportages, comments, reviews) were forcefully adapted to the needs or will of the Party and the variable talents and education of the practitioners. Literary and investigative journalism, whenever they appeared, were seen as little more than oddities, and dangerous ones at that.

THE KANDY-KOLORED SOCIALISM

Cancio's generation, coming of age at the end of the 1980s, had reasons to be moderately optimistic. At the time he was in university, the Cuban press was showing some signs of life. The country's leaders had started a process of timid economic reforms and had called for a more vigorous and open discussion of Cuba's many problems. The political process initiated around 1986 was parallel to the Soviet perestroika and led to an unprecedented debate of what Fidel labelled "mistakes and negative trends." The Cuban "rectification" peaked in the fall of 1990, when most of the country discussed in open assemblies held in workplaces and neighborhoods the manifesto for the IV Congress of the Communist Party. Ordinary citizens demanded more democracy and even questioned the supremacy of the Party. When the Congress finally convened, in the fall of 1991, the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe had fallen, the Soviet Union itself had its days numbered, and Cuba had sunk into a severe economic and political crisis. Any calls for more democracy were shut down, and the press, which had become significantly more critical of many aspects of the country's social life, was reduced once more to an instrument of political propaganda, ideological education, and popular mobilization.

A key moment in that period of relative openness in the Cuban press between 1984 and 1991 was the publication in 1987, in a small monthly magazine called *Somos Jóvenes* (*We are Young*), of a long piece titled "El Caso Sandra" ("The Sandra File"). It appeared unsigned, but it was later established that its author was the young writer Luis Manuel García.¹⁹ The career of

García had been somewhat unorthodox. He had a degree in Geology and had taught Physics and Statistics.²⁰ He had joined *Somos Jóvenes* in 1984 and had started writing both journalism and fiction. By 1987, he had published three volumes of short stories and was already well known in the circles of young writers and artists in Havana. His unconventional career and his avoidance of formal journalism education in Party-controlled schools might help explain “El Caso Sandra.” This was an extremely frank account of the travails of a young prostitute under Castro’s socialism. Sandra was the pseudonym of a young woman whose occupation had allegedly disappeared. She was not supposed to exist, much less be featured in a magazine whose aim was the political and moral education of the Cuban youth. García “interrogated her for many hours, accompanied her during her cruising nights in Havana, and invited her to dine” at his house.²¹ The result was a fascinating and, for most people, shocking depiction of a zone of the Cuban reality whose existence had never been admitted in public by either Party officials or journalists of the State media. Sandra, a school dropout, had been kicked out of her house by her father, a high ranking Party officer, and survived by sleeping with both Cuban bigwigs and foreign tourists and entrepreneurs. She lived in a world of luxury hotels, drugs, and paid-for sex. García, who belongs to a literary generation that was stylistically closer to the muscular realism of its American contemporaries than to the flamboyant verbosity of classic Cuban writers like Alejo Carpentier or José Lezama Lima, or the magical realism of Latin American greats like Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, told the story of Sandra without verbal flourishes or didactic moralizing. The story, he remembers, “went through the different episodes of a sad but real life, and rejected any Manichaeian interpretation. It did not aim to be sensationalist, and the proof of it was its concise style and the discretion with which I addressed certain topics. But it was somewhat sensational because it uncovered an underworld most people did not know.”²² Sandra appears as a tragic heroine, the unfortunate victim of a dysfunctional family and a hypocritical society. The story begins like this:

Sandra met her father when she was eleven. From that moment on, a man who had been an unknown became simply a stranger. Though she was the eldest of five children, Sandra had spent half her life with an unmarried aunt, who taught her a philosophy of self-defence. “If a boy hits you, you hit him back with a stick. If you want people to respect you, you have to show them that you are not weak. Look at your mother. She has been waiting on that man for fifteen years, washing his clothes every time he shows up. That’s why I live alone. Nobody fucks with me. Remember that”. During those eleven years, Sandra lived with her mother for only a few short periods. She was not allowed to play outside and much less play with boys.

“Because women’s place is home, and besides, you have work to do.” Since she was seven, Sandra washed the clothes of her brothers and sisters, and since she was nine she started cooking for them, because her mother had got a job somewhere and could not take care of the children. Every time there were rumours that her father might come back home, Sandra knew her place in her parents’ bed would be taken, and she would be sent back to her aunt’s. Nobody ever explained anything to her. There was no need. At eleven, Sandra already knew too much and had changed schools nine times.

She finally met her father for two reasons: he had been reprimanded by the Party for not caring about his children, and he returned home more or less definitely.²³

García follows Sandra through the labyrinth of Havana’s low ends. Moving scene by scene,²⁴ García introduces prostitutes, pimps, pornographers, foreign tourists, policemen, and other obscure characters. His reconstruction of Sandra’s conversations with some of these characters fully validates Tom Wolfe’s belief in the capacity of what he calls “realistic dialogue” to involve the reader “more completely than any other device.”²⁵ This is demonstrated in the following example:

Three times she was arrested and another three she escaped arrest thanks to the protection of her client, who protested in the name of human rights. . . . It was the same policeman the three times. Once, in the Hotel Nacional, he called her aside and asked: “Why are you doing this? You are young, pretty, smart. You are full of potential. My daughter is your age. You look like her. Why do you do this?” “I have done nothing.” “Bullshit.” “Look, I know you are after me. . . .” “I am not. I am after what you do.” “But I . . .” “Look, I know Candela, Tormenta, La China and the rest, are looking for someone who can help them leave the country, but you . . . You too?” “Not in a million years.” “Then, do you realize, damn it, the image you are giving of your own country? You know the saying: you don’t shit where you eat? You are shitting where you eat.” “Look, officer, I . . .” “I don’t want to hear anything else. You better quit, because if I see you again, no matter what you are doing, even if you are having an ice cream, I will arrest you. Or you quit of your own will, or I will make you.” Three times he arrested her. She was always released the day after, for lack of evidence. The story of the policeman made her remember a Frenchman who had criticized Cuba and socialism. When she tried to reply, arguing that not everything was bad, and mentioned that there were no beggars in Cuba, and education and health care were free, he laughed at her. “Look who’s talking. A Communist whore. You don’t sell yourself for rubles or pesos. You sell yourself for dollars. Get it?” She said nothing, but never forgot that night.²⁶

It is unclear how much García, who had no formal literary training, knew about the American New Journalism, if he knew anything at all. But his story had the “immediacy,” the “concrete reality,” the “emotional involvement,” the “gripping” or “absorbing quality” that Wolfe claimed the new journalists of the 1960s had begun discovering in realist fiction and were bringing to their own reportages.²⁷ “El Caso Sandra” was ill-fated, though. The then chief ideologue of the Party, Carlos Aldana, called a meeting with the staff of the magazine. Aldana asked each of the writers what they thought about the story. Only two out of the seventeen writers distanced themselves from Sandra; the others accepted collective responsibility for it. It was the end for the kind of hard-hitting, deep-digging journalism *Somos Jóvenes* had naively attempted to produce. One of the two journalists who rejected responsibility for “El Caso Sandra” was appointed director. García was condemned, rather benignly, to write about distant planets, oddities, and ancient history. As García himself has noted, “Any historical event dated after the European Renaissance was considered too recent, and I wasn’t trusted to write about it with the required prudence.”²⁸ He left the country in 1994 and settled in Spain, where he has continued publishing fiction while editing, until very recently, *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, the most influential journal of the Cuban exile.

THE ELOQUENCE OF THE PAST

By the time Luis Manuel García left *Somos Jóvenes*, another prominent journalist of the 1980s, Leonardo Padura, had also abandoned journalism, though he would never leave Cuba, where he is still living. Padura had made a name for himself writing in the daily newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* (Rebel Youth), the organ of the Communist Youth League. Like García’s, Padura’s career had been very different from most of his colleagues’. The young Padura had wanted to be a baseball player, but after acknowledging he was not good enough, he decided to start writing. He completed a degree in Latin American literature in the University of Havana, and soon after got a job at *El Caimán Barbudo* (*The Bearded Cayman*), a magazine in which many young writers and artists discussed obscure philosophical matters and also, as much as they could, Cuba’s reality. Padura’s unusually polished style²⁹ and his willingness to dig in to subjects the authorities would rather keep out of the press were noticed by the Party: he was deemed to have “ideological problems” and sent to work in *Juventud Rebelde*, where he would be under stricter watch. But his arrival at the newspaper coincided with the start of the political opening of the late 1980s.

Padura found in *Juventud Rebelde* a group of mostly young writers and journalists ready to take advantage of those favorable circumstances. Among

them was Emilio Surí Quesada, who had also worked on *El Caimán Barbudo* and *Somos Jóvenes* and who had served as war correspondent in Nicaragua, Angola, and Western Sahara. By the mid-1980s, Surí had published a volume of poetry, a novel, a biography, and two nonfiction books, both about Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution. Unlike Padura and García, Surí had studied journalism at the University of Havana, but had not completed his degree. His Nicaragua stories paid more attention to the psychological development of the characters than to the intricacies of politics in Central America. He would leave Cuba in 1992, shortly after a piece he had written about the final days of Nicolae Ceausescu had been both praised and instantly banned by Fidel Castro himself.³⁰

The other significant literary journalist in *Juventud Rebelde* at the end of the 1980s was Angel Tomás González, who was the editor of the cultural pages. Tomás, a prolific interviewer, would not leave Cuba, but would cease working for the official media in the early 1990s and become the Havana-based correspondent of Madrid's *El Mundo*, a newspaper with a strong anti-Castro stance. These three, Padura, Surí and Tomás, formed a troika that animated the Sunday issue of *Juventud Rebelde* for several years and that is credited with bringing to journalism hundreds of young men and women who had suddenly discovered that something published in a newspaper, even in a Cuban newspaper, could be entertaining and beautifully written.³¹

Of the three, Padura was the most enduring and the one who most successfully adapted his literary ambitions to the format of the reportage. After he left *Juventud Rebelde*, he dedicated himself entirely to fiction and literary research, with great success. He is the only one among the literary and investigative journalists of the 1980s in Cuba whose nonfiction stories were compiled and published, in a volume entitled *El Viaje Más Largo* (*The Longest Trip*). Padura's stories were nothing like "El Caso Sandra," which might help explain his survival in *Juventud Rebelde* and the publication of *El Viaje Más Largo*. Instead of addressing Cuba's problems straight away, Padura adopted a more cautious strategy: he wrote about episodes and characters of the past, which somehow shed light on the country's present misfortune. One of his most memorable pieces was "Yarini, el Rey: vida, pasión y muerte del más célebre proxeneta de Cuba" ("Yarini, the King: the life and death of Cuba's most celebrated pimp"), the profile of a famous character of early twentieth-century Havana, Alberto Yarini, who had controlled the business of prostitution in the city and whose youth, beauty, and premature death at the hands of a rival gang transformed him into a legend. Unlike García's "El Caso Sandra," which forced Cubans to admit prostitution still existed, Padura's story went to great lengths to emphasize that Yarini's world was in the long-forgotten past. How-

ever, Padura's recollection of life in San Isidro in the beginning of the century was full of romantic nostalgia for a time when there was a bar on every street corner where prostitutes, pimps, businessmen, and high-flying politicians mingled during endless nights of sex and power games. Yarini's San Isidro was, in Padura's words, the "national centre of happiness and shame."³² In contrast, 1988's San Isidro was a slum where, although there were still prostitutes, there were hardly any bars in which people could drink their boredom down. For all the misery of the past, it still sounded more exciting than the dull present. Padura's reconstruction of the assassination of Yarini shows unmistakably the influence of Gabriel García Márquez's fast-paced storytelling, his penchant for detail, and his ability to manipulate narrative time:

When the clock struck five to eight, Yarini entered the house in number 60 San Isidro, where Elena Morales and Celia Marín received their clients. Four minutes was all that it took for Yarini to have a chat with Elena and Celia, drink the last cup of coffee of his life, and laugh at a joke of Pepito Basterrechea.

And:

Rosa Martínez, the prostitute at number 61, opened her door and stuck her head out when the clock was about to strike one minute to eight. The street was inexplicably empty. She saw two men coming to her. One was wearing a bowler hat. At that moment, Rosa heard someone laughing, and turned her eyes towards the opposite side of the street. Two men were coming out of number 60: Yarini and Basterrechea. . . . Many months later, during the trial in Havana's Justice Court, Rosa Martínez remembered that just when she saw Yarini, she heard steps in the roof and a voice that shouted: "Yarini, I am going to whack you!" Then there were shots. Rosa couldn't see anything more, because at that moment she covered her face.³³

“**E**l Viaje Más Largo” is also the title of one of the stories included in Padura's book, about the rise and decline of Havana's Chinatown. Like San Isidro, Yarini's fiefdom, Havana's Chinatown was by the end of the 1980s a shadow of its former self. It had once been one of the largest Chinese settlements in the Americas, but after Castro's rise to power, trade in the area collapsed and no further immigrants arrived to replace the ailing founders. Padura's recollection of the history of Chinatown, of its origin and of the years of its prosperity, had the same effect as his Yarini story: it showed the bottomless mediocrity of Cuba's present:

At the end of the nineteenth century, Chinatown, where around ten-thousand Chinese lived, had become self-sufficient: society clubs, shops of all kind, theatres, casinos, opium houses, newspapers, pharmacies, brothels and funeral houses guaranteed the satisfaction of all needs and appetites.

Thanks to the intervention of Consuls Lin Liang Yuang and Tan Kim Cho, the Chinese even acquired their own cemetery, where they could lay with their heads pointing towards the east, and also a care house, where they could wait, in rather appalling conditions, the arrival of death.³⁴

Most of that world had disappeared by the time Padura wrote his piece. He found in the neighbourhood a few authentic Chinese, including Ung Ing Tah Van, who arrived in Cuba in 1919. Ung Ing Tah Van returned to China once, but discovered nobody remembered him, and went back to Cuba, where he changed his name to Luis. He told Padura his story:

—Luis, did you ever marry?

—No, a Chinese man can manage alone. But I did have some women, oh yes.

—Did you ever feel lonely?

— Some people have company all their lives and still feel lonely. That's the way it is.

— What do you remember of your country?

— Misery, which forced so many people to emigrate. It's better not to remember, don't you think?³⁵

This poignant story of emigration, of people who had to abandon their homes to escape poverty and settled in a new land away from their families, had a profound resonance in 1980s Cuba. Just seven years before the publication of “El Viaje Más Largo” in *Juventud Rebelde*, 125,000 Cubans had abandoned their country during the Mariel Harbour boatlift. Most were escaping the hardships of life in Cuba and the political and social asphyxia of the 1970s. Hundreds of thousands would leave Cuba in the two decades that followed the publication of his story. Padura did not ever write a word suggesting the connection between his characters of the past and his contemporaries, but the real subject of all his pieces is the contrast between the different historical ages of his country: the exciting, though terrible, past and the huge disappointments of the present.

IN THE LINE OF DUTY

While Padura was writing his reminiscences of a bygone era, Rosa Miriam Elizalde was just a student at the Faculty of Journalism of the University of Havana. There, she must have met Wilfredo Cancio, at the time the latter was reading a well-disguised copy of *The New Journalism*. It is possible Elizalde also read Tom Wolfe's book, or a bit of it, during that time, but, no matter how similar their readings, they would follow very different career

paths. Cancio became a respected cultural commentator and a popular lecturer in the same Faculty from which he graduated. In 1994, he travelled to the US and decided not to return to Cuba. Just before he left his country, he published a report on the state of Cuban journalism, in which he denounced it as “a model of communication based in a scheme of lineal transmission, extremely vertical, and tied to some ingenuous socio functionalism, with a conception of media as mere ideological instruments.”³⁶ He listed the maladies of the Cuban press: “poverty of language, limited sourcing, lack of initiative, scarcity of points of view, very limited specialisation, didacticism, and many other problems that would add a very long etcetera.”³⁷ When Cancio left Cuba, Elizalde was already the deputy director of *Juventud Rebelde*, less than six years after graduating from the University of Havana. By then, Padura had abandoned journalism and was wholly dedicated to fiction. But *Juventud Rebelde* was still enjoying the reputation for good writing gained during those short years at the end of the 1980s, when the works of Padura, Surí, Tomás and other journalists made the Youth Communist League’s newspaper stand apart from the bulk of the grey Cuban press.³⁸

Juventud Rebelde made the most of its privileged position in the system of Cuban journalism, in which every newspaper has a specific political and communicative function and speaks to a particular segment of the population. The Party’s severe, humorless newspaper, *Granma*, took and still takes the lead in political information, playing a semi-normative, agenda-setting role. The newspaper of the Party-controlled unions, *Trabajadores*, is famously dull and didactic.³⁹ Because *Juventud Rebelde* attempts to engage with a younger reader than does *Granma* or *Trabajadores*, it has been allowed some stylistic liberty and a certain degree of adventurousness in its news coverage. In the early nineties, it employed a number of very young, ambitious, and well-educated journalists, just graduated from the University of Havana, who attempted to write in a way that was most unusual in socialist Cuba. They admired classic Cuban authors like José Martí, Jorge Mañach, and Pablo de la Torriente Brau; they were devotees of Gabriel García Márquez; and some had also read American nonfiction writers like Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Gay Talese. The literary ambitions of this generation can be seen in the vocabulary, the syntax, the narrative structures, and the cultural references of journalists like Magda Resik, Eduardo Jiménez, Alina Perera, René Tamayo, Félix López, Dean Luis Reyes, Michel Contreras, and Rosa Miriam Elizalde. Of all these journalists, Elizalde would have the brightest career in Cuba. Most of the others left the newspaper and followed separate routes. Elizalde, after a long tenure as chief editor and then deputy director, also left, and is now the editor of *Cubadebate*, an online publication. She produced in 1996

the masterpiece of this generation of *Juventud Rebelde*, “Flores Desechables” (“Disposable Flowers”), yet another take on the phenomenon of prostitution in Cuba. However, “Flores Desechables” had a very different reception to that suffered by García’s “El Caso Sandra.” Elizalde’s series, published over several months in *Juventud Rebelde*, was almost immediately collected in a book, and her author was showered with awards.

The obsession of Cuban investigative and literary journalists with prostitution is probably caused by the literary possibilities of the subject (multi-layered, tragic characters; fast-paced narrative; sex) and its political and social repercussions. The visible boom in prostitution at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, in the middle of the devastating economic crisis that followed the disappearance of the Communist bloc in Europe, forced the government to address the problem directly. What, in the case of García’s story, had been an individual initiative that almost cost him his career, was, in the case of “Flores Desechables,” a project co-authored by Elizalde and her party bosses. If “El Caso Sandra” aimed to uncover a world many people had not the slightest idea of, “Flores Desechables” had the obvious intention of being the definitive word on prostitution in Cuba, a sort of Party editorial. García had made a point of not talking to official sources (the police, the official Federation of Cuban Women, the judiciary). This was a clear repudiation of the reliability, honesty, and even relevance of such sources. At the center of “Flores Desechables,” however, there is an interview with then Cuba’s Attorney General, General Juan Escalona. While García refused to “contextualize” his story, and did not make any references to the history of prostitution in Cuba before Castro (something Padura had done in “Yarini, el Rey”), or to the industry of sex in the world, Elizalde aimed to normalize prostitution by insisting that the rise in the number of *jineteras* (prostitutes) walking up and down Havana’s Quinta Avenida was insignificant in comparison to what Cubans had seen before 1959 and what anyone in the world could still see anywhere. Both Padura and Elizalde looked at the past, but history, for the former, was a territory open to exploration and discovery; for the latter, history had already been written, had been closed and transformed into ideology. Padura found in history an indictment of the present, or at least an indication of its incompleteness; Elizalde found a justification, a teleology of the Revolution. While García declined to condemn Sandra, and instead blamed a dysfunctional society for her personal tragedy, Elizalde, along the lines of the official discourse, treated with great severity those involved in the trade of prostitution and accused the foreign media of magnifying Cuba’s problems. Elizalde seemingly had the support of the Party, the judiciary, and the police. Her *pièce de résistance* was an interview with a pimp dedicated to providing

young boys to foreign tourists for sex. At the end of the interview, Elizalde claimed the pimp was already in jail: she did not make clear whether she had interviewed him in prison (crucial information to assess the reliability of the source) or denounced him to the police after granting the man confidentiality (therefore opening the door to an endless controversy about the ethics of interviewing).

Nevertheless, there is still literary ambition and merit in “Flores Desechables.” Elizalde’s long and uneven text includes sections of historic data, question-and-answer interviews, and scenes of the lives of the characters the journalist met during her research. At one point, she follows one prostitute as the woman travels from Havana, where she lives, to her family home in eastern Cuba:

She arrived at her home in Las Tunas in a taxi paid by a fifty-something Dutchman. Her father was sitting in the garden, in the shadow of a *jagüey*, and did not say a word. He did not even ask what she had been doing since she left home. He carried on smoking, without ever taking his eyes off her. He was wearing the watch she had sent him some weeks before.

Her grandmother did come to greet her as soon as someone shouted *Hildita is here*. After hugging and kissing her and taking her luggage inside, her grandmother told her she was beautiful and that she had not received all the money Hilda had sent her with a man. *Don't send me the money with that jinetero ever again* and Hilda, who had believed her return home could be a happy event, a truce with her past, felt she was about to cry.

Is it true you are a dancer? asked a neighbour who couldn't take her eyes off the shoes Hilda was wearing, and who obviously did not swallow the story of her *job* in Havana. *Yes, a Tropicana star*, and Hilda explained that she had to dance with a red-sequin dress and a flowery hat, and that the choreographies were so hard that she finished every night completely exhausted.⁴⁰

“Flores Desechables” concludes, in rather unfortunate agit-prop mode, with a call to Cubans to fight prostitution. “We Cubans do not have to put up with prostitution,” Elizalde claims.⁴¹ In the two decades after her call, however, a few other journalists would write about the same subject and found that nothing much had changed.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The works of Luis Manuel García, Leonardo Padura, and Rosa Miriam Elizalde, which appeared in the relatively short period of nine years, between 1987 and 1996, still define the modalities of literary journalism in Communist Cuba, differentiated not by the style or narrative techniques of the authors, but by the triangular relationship between the texts, the social

reality they attempt to describe, and the political actors policing the structures of meaning of the official culture. The main challenge of narrative literary journalism in Cuba is breaking with the strict norms of representation of reality imposed by Fidel Castro and enforced by countless Party apparatchiks in newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, radio and television stations, and film studios. Cuban journalism continues bleeding its talent: in the past decade, many young journalists of great literary potential have left the country and settled abroad, or simply changed jobs.⁴³

Still, a few journalists in national and local media have continued trying to write literary reportages about some of Cuba's most intractable problems. Not many have done what Elizalde did: the Party very rarely has commissioned controversial stories. Most have followed Padura's caution and written stories about old events and characters. Among these is Luis Raúl Vázquez, a prolific *Juventud Rebelde* reporter, who has published many stories about dramatic episodes of the revolution and also about the small people of his hometown, Ciego de Ávila. Vázquez himself has attempted to explain the interest of literary journalists in history, referring to the "wealth of conflicts, stories and characters that would tempt any journalist to tell them again as if they were from the present."⁴⁴ A very small group has attempted to write stories in the guise of "El Caso Sandra": most of those stories were never published, and in some cases the authors suffered reprimands as harsh as García did before. The young journalist Boris Caro, who co-authored a BA dissertation about literary journalism in 2003, saw how his story about the ordeal of the neighbors of a crumbling building in Havana, written with notable literary flair, was deemed too frank and shelved by the editors of *Granma Internacional*, the international edition of the Party's newspaper. Caro published it in his blog instead. He too would end up leaving the country.

More recently, two journalists with a strong literary vocation have appeared on opposite poles of the Cuban media spectrum. In *Cubadebate*, under Elizalde's editorship, and in his own blog *Crónicas Obscenas (Obscene Chronicles)*, the very young Carlos Manuel Álvarez, who has not yet finished his journalism degree, writes literary chronicles and essays that often leave his readers puzzled or in awe. In another blog, *Lunes de Post-Revolución (Post-Revolution Monday)*, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, a biochemist who now writes what he calls "essays, opinions, delusions, interviews, features, vile ironies, reports, dreams,"⁴⁵ has attracted the ire of the political establishment with his relentless attacks on the vulgarity and hypocrisy of Cuba's social and cultural life. Other independent bloggers of varied literary merits have appeared in recent years, including Yoani Sánchez, a philologist and author of *Generación Y*, the most influential and popular of all Cuban blogs inside or outside the

island and a favorite target of both the State Security, which blocked it for years, and the official media, which has labelled her a CIA-paid mercenary.⁴⁶ It is there, online, and outside the increasingly narrow boundaries of the regime's official discourse, where most of whatever literary journalism is written now in Cuba can be found.

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NOTES

1. Cancio told this story in a letter to his friend Emilio Ichikawa, under the title “Carta sobre el periodismo cubano y la Prof. Rodríguez Betancourt,” which the latter published in his personal blog. See <http://eichikawa.com/2010/03/carta-sobre-el-periodismo-cubano-y-la-prof-rodriguez-betancourt.html>.

2. There were debates in Cuba about the worth of “capitalist authors” as late as 1988. In an interview that year, the then president of the Union of Cuban Journalists, Julio García Luis, defended the publication of books from non-socialist authors. “If we have a socialist author, if he writes from the experience of the socialist journalist and he expresses that experience up to the modern requirements of journalism, then, welcome! . . . Now, if we do not have a socialist author, then we appeal to capitalist authors, and if he is an experienced author, we publish his book. We should not fear to publish books from capitalist origin. At the end, technique acquires its class content for the way it is used.” In 1990, numerous books from American, Latin American, and Western European authors were added to the new syllabus of the Faculty of Communication of the University of Havana, and the Faculty quietly got rid of Soviet-inspired textbooks, including hundreds of copies of Lenin’s *On the Press*. García is quoted by David Mateo and Pelayo Terry: “*La profesión de los contratiempos. (Acerca de la formación actual de los periodistas y sus perspectivas de desarrollo)*” (BA diss., University of Havana, 1988).

3. The New Journalism received a formal rebuke from Soviet academic V. Sokolov in an article published in 1977 in *The Democratic Journalist*, a journal of the now disbanded International Organisation of Journalists. The New Journalism, Sokolov said, was “a socio-literary conception that aims to weaken and then cancel the cognitive and analytical, thus transformative, functions of the press, depriving journalism of its increasingly important social role. This comes very handy to the imperialists, eager to restore their control over the hearts and minds of people.” V. Sokolov, “The ‘new journalism’ – the conception of a social mythology,” in *The Democratic Journalist*, 7-8 and 9 (1977).

4. The president of the Union of Cuban Journalists, Tubal Páez, acknowledged in 2011 that “unfortunately, our stories generally lack elegance, wit, charm, grace, humour and also ideas that [could] fascinate, attract and catch [the reader].” He called on journalists to “get rid of the bureaucratic language that impoverishes both journalism and politics.” Quoted by Miguel Torres Barbá, “Frente al espejo: la prensa apuesta por ser más atractiva”, in AIN, <http://www.tribuna.co.cu/etiquetas/2011/mayo/12/frente.html>

5. Gabriel García Márquez, “El oficio de la palabra hablada.” in *Juventud Rebelde*, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2006-08-13/el-oficio-de-la-palabra-hablada/>

6. At the end of 1958, there were in Cuba 16 national daily newspapers of different political signs (there are only two today). Juan Marrero, *Prensa sin Retorno* (Pablo de la Torriente, Havana, 1998). In February of 1959, the Ministry of Labour reported 117 companies of “terrestrial newspapers” and 56 of “radio and TV newspapers”. Roberto León Enrique, *Última Edición* (Arte y Literatura, Havana, 1975). Fidel Castro himself acknowledged that Cuba had at the time “great resources of communication.” Quoted by Ana Núñez Machín, *Pensamiento Revolucionario y medios de difusión masiva* (Editora Política, Havana, 1983).

7. “On a basic level, journalism has provided writers with an income,” says Richard Keeble. That was particularly true of pre- 1959 Cuba, with a relatively small reading public and an underdeveloped publishing industry. Richard Keeble, “On journalism, creativity and imagination,” in *The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter*, ed. Richard Keeble and Sharon Wheeler (London: Routledge, 2007), 5.

8. Like John Hartsock in *A History of American Literary Journalism*, every time I refer in this paper to “literary journalism,” I mean “narrative literary journalism,” since the works I discuss “are fundamentally narrative rather than discursive.” Hartsock lists reasons to characterize this form as “literary,” which, for the purposes of this paper, I accept: “One is that such a form borrows techniques often associated with the realist novel and short story, thus giving such texts a literary context . . . Second, there has long been a critical consciousness that such texts have the potential for being literary . . . At the heart of the issue is the perception. . . that a work is ‘literary’ as opposed to its being some kind of demonstrably transcendent ‘literature.’ Third, such texts are literary in the sense that as social allegories they eschew a rhetorical literalness for a figurativeness or literary resonance reflected in a

host of interpretive possibilities . . . as well as in the full range of more traditional figures of speech and the techniques associated with the traditional fictional novel.” John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 11-12.

9. Cuban journalists make a clear distinction between reportage and run-of-the-mill news stories: the former is longer, deeper, is usually not breaking news (although it can contain important revelations), and shows more vividly the author’s personal style. Professor Miriam Rodríguez Betancourt, of the Faculty of Communication of the University of Havana, who has taught several generations of Cuban journalists, defines reportage as “a narrative of some literary quality about a topical event or issue, based on a thorough investigation conducted with the aim to provide a bigger picture of that particular subject through analysis and interpretation.” Miriam Rodríguez Betancourt, “Tipología del periodismo contemporáneo” (lecture delivered at the International Institute of Journalism “José Martí,” Havana, 2001).

10. Discussing the case of Günther Wallraff, who “is viewed more as an investigative journalist” than a literary one, Bernhard Poerksen says that “investigative journalism and New Journalism need not be mutually exclusive.” Not only that, narrative literary journalism and investigative journalism are closely related: both produce a complex, out-of-the-ordinary, challenging view of the social reality, and, at least in Cuba, suffer the consequences of doing it. Most of the great works of narrative literary journalism, such as the ones discussed in this paper, are also remarkable feats of journalistic research, obviously not a coincidence. See Bernhard Poerksen, “The Milieu of a Magazine: *Tempo* as an Exponent of German New Journalism,” in *Literary Journalism Studies* 1 (2010): 28.

11. The antagonism between good writing and ideological orthodoxy would soon become evident in the journalism of socialist Cuba. Acknowledging the problem, the third Congress of the Union of Cuban Journalists, in 1974, declared: “Good writing comes from thinking and acting rightly. If those three things cannot be together, we’d rather renounce to good writing.” Politburo member Armando Hart congratulated Cuban journalists for “having cleansed themselves of the bad habits of bourgeois journalism” and for having adopted a more “synthetic and direct” style. Quoted in Juan Marrero, “Tercer Congreso 1974: compromiso de los periodistas y la prensa cubana con el socialismo,” *Cubaperiodistas*, el sitio de la Unión de Periodistas de Cuba, accessed August 19, 2010, http://www.cubaperiodistas.cu/libro_congresos/cap04.html.

12. In 1979, twenty years after Castro’s rise to power, a census of the Union of Cuban Journalists reported that only 36.5 percent of the country’s journalists had a university degree. Antonio Medina and Adiala González, “Formación y superación en el periodismo actual” (BA diss., University of Havana, 1985), 39, 42.

13. “The Cuban journalist is an ideological worker and is firmly committed to the international objectives of socialism,” Politburo member Armando Hart told delegates to the Congress of the Union of Cuban Journalists in 1974. Quoted in Marrero, *ibid.*

14. Some notable books of nonfiction narrative appeared in Cuba after 1959, including Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966), Enrique Cirules's *Conversación con el último americano* (1973) and *El Imperio de La Habana* (1993), Norberto Fuentes's *Hemingway in Cuba* (1985), and Jaime Sarusky's *Los fantasmas de Omaja* (1986). All these books have something in common: they examine the pre revolutionary past and carefully avoid the country's present. Discussing Barnet's *Cimarrón* as part of the Latin American "testimonio," Pablo Calvi noticed its symbolic value: the history of a former slave who lived long enough to join the Cuban revolution is seen as an attempt to draw "the portrait of a whole class and, eventually, of a whole nation, as well as the path for its liberation through the communist revolution." See Pablo Calvi, "Latin America's Own 'New Journalism,'" in *Literary Journalism Studies* 2 (2011): 63. This paper does not discuss long-form nonfiction, focusing instead on stories published in the press.

15. Osvaldo Dorticós, "Constitución de la UPEC," in *Diez Años de la UPEC* (Havana: UPEC, 1974), 12.

16. "Resolución sobre los medios de difusión masiva," in *Memorias del Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Havana: DOR, 1976), 308.

17. Raúl Castro, "Discurso en la clausura del IV Congreso de la Unión de Periodistas de Cuba," in *Memorias del IV Congreso de la Unión de Periodistas de Cuba* (Havana: Editora Política, 1980), 245.

18. Raúl Castro, "El rumbo ya ha sido trazado," in *Cubadebate*, accessed July 2012, <http://www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2012/01/29/discurso-de-raul-castro-en-la-primer-conferencia-nacional-del-pcc/>

19. Note: The texts of Luis Manuel García, Leonardo Padura, and Rosa Miriam Elizalde in this article have been translated by the author article from the original in Spanish.

20. García's career is, actually, typical of literary journalists outside Cuba. Of the nineteen American literary journalists profiled in Robert S. Boynton's *The New New Journalism*, only, oddly, Gay Talese majored in journalism in college. Robert S. Boynton, *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Non Fiction Writers on Their Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

21. Luis Manuel García, "El Caso del Caso Sandra," in *Habaneceras de Luis Manuel García*, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.cubaencuentro.com/luis-manuel-garcia/blogs/habaneceras/habanerias/el-caso-del-caso-sandra>.

22. García, "El Caso del Caso Sandra."

23. Luis Manuel García, "El Caso Sandra," in *La Palabra Audaz: selección de lecturas de periodismo de investigación en Cuba*, ed. Amaury E. del Valle and Lázaro Bacallao Pino. (Havana: Pablo de la Torriente, 2006), 195.

24. Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (London: Picador, 1975), 46.

25. *Ibid.*

26. García, "El Caso Sandra," 199.

27. Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 46.

28. García, "El Caso del Caso Sandra."

29. "In the 1980s," Padura would later explain, "the state controlled all the

cultural activity, it was a decade of social realism. We were opposed to that kind of literature so we tried to find another way to reflect what was going on.” He largely succeeded, both in fiction and nonfiction. Padura’s detective novels would go on to be compared with those of Dashiell Hammett and Paul Auster. See Duncan Campbell, “The Hammet of Havana,” in *The Guardian*, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/sep/12/cuba.crimebooks?INTCMP=SRCH> and James Parker, “Fiction Chronicle,” in *The New York Times*, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/17/books/review/17PARKERC.html?pagewanted=1>

30. Or so Surí claims, in “Los últimos días de Ceaucescu,” published in *Baracutey Cubano*, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://baracuteycubano.blogspot.com/2006/08/muerte-del-mito-castrista-los-ltimos.html>.

31. *Juventud Rebelde’s* reputation during these years as the most propitious vehicle for literary journalism was greatly benefited by Gabriel García Márquez’s immensely popular Sunday column, which ran until the early 1990s.

32. “Yarini, el Rey: vida, pasión y muerte del más célebre proxeneta de Cuba.” Courtesy of Leonardo Padura.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Leonardo Padura, “El Viaje Más Largo,” in *La Palabra Audaz: selección de lecturas de periodismo de investigación en Cuba*, ed. Amaury E. del Valle and Lázaro Bacallao Pino (Havana: Pablo de la Torriente, 2006), 183.

35. *Ibid.*, 184.

36. Wilfredo Cancio Isla, “El periodismo en Cuba,” in Sala de Prensa, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.saladeprensa.org/art06.htm>.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Even Fidel Castro noticed. Talking to *Juventud Rebelde’s* journalists in 1999, he praised the newspaper’s style: “You write excellent stories. . . you know how to use words. . . you write beautifully.” Juan Marrero, “Séptimo Congreso 1999. Periodistas e ideas justas para el mundo”, in *Cubaperiodistas.cu*, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.saladeprensa.org/art06.htm>.

39. *Trabajadores’s* function, one of its reporters recently wrote, is “as an instrument to orientate [the masses], and explain and analyse problems and deficiencies everywhere, to help find a solution.” Alina Martínez Triay, “What we are lacking,” in *Trabajadores*, accessed September 2012, <http://www.trabajadores.cu/news/20120527/259864-lo-que-nos-falta>.

40. Rosa Miriam Elizalde, “Flores Desechables,” *La Palabra Audaz: selección de lecturas de periodismo de investigación en Cuba*, ed. Amaury E. del Valle and Lázaro Bacallao Pino (Havana: Pablo de la Torriente, 2006), 237.

41. Elizalde, 258.

42. For example, Amir Valle in his *Habana Babilonia* (Havana Babylon), a book that circulated in Cuba via email or in flash memories, and was finally published in 2006 in Argentina, Colombia, and the United States.

43. Between 1991 and 2000, around 250 students completed a B.A. in Journalism or Social Communication at the Faculty of Communication of the

University of Havana. In 2004, while writing his Ph.D. thesis, the author of this article found that more than half of those young journalists had left either Cuba or journalism, often both. From the class of 1995, his own, fewer than ten, out of forty, still work as journalists in Cuba. About half of the others are abroad. See Juan Orlando Pérez González, "The Son of the Scribe: The Professional Ideology of the Young Cuban Journalists" (PhD diss, University of Westminster, London, 2005).

44. Luis Raúl Vázquez Muñoz, "Periodismo Histórico: la criatura que quiere vestirse," in Sala de Prensa, accessed August 19, 2010, <http://www.saladeprensa.org/art765.htm>.

45. Claudia Cadelo, "Cuba: Interview with Blogger Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo," in Global Voices, accessed January 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/03/23/cuba-interview-with-blogger-orlando-luis-pardo-lazo/>.

46. Esteban Collazo, "Yoani Sánchez: la bloguera de la CIA", in Cambios en Cuba, accessed January 2012, <http://cambiosencuba.blogspot.com/2009/12/yoani-sanchez-la-bloguera-de-la-cia.html>.