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*Yo Soy Mi Isla*¹: The Fictional Cuba of Wendy Guerra

Cleo is out to dinner with some friends in Mexico. She is far from home— from Cuba. She tells them, “I was the last witness, the last of the beachgoers left in our abandoned city, so I told them about every last minute of my last days to describe what is happening in Cuba... None of them could have put up with what we endured every single day. How could they?”² The mood is tense in the restaurant. They all want to ask her, *Why do you stay in Cuba?* but do not. Cleo is not sure what she would even say, what the truth really is.

After Alejo Carpentier visited the ruins of the Palace of Sans Souci in Haiti, he “was moved to compare the marvelous reality [he] had recently experienced with that exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has characterized certain European literatures” of his time.³ He writes on the “marvelous real,” the odd juxtaposition of the magical with the truth. He argues that while some may want to apply European Surrealism to the Americas, the Americas hold a fantasy in its reality by nature alone. Through its “presence of the Indian and of the Black... the Americas are far from having used up their wealth of mythologies.” Because of Latin America’s unique and diverse history, aspects from non-European folklore are constantly appearing in everyday life, which writers may only attempt to capture. Magical Realism, the more familiar term, was pioneered by Gabriel García Márquez during the Latin American Boom in the 1960s, although obviously not without precedence. Wendy Guerra studied with Márquez,

¹ Wendy Guerra, *Domingo De Revolución*. Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Anagrama S.A., 2016.

² Wendy Guerra, and Achy Obejas, *Revolution Sunday: A Novel*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2018, 19

³ Alejo Carpentier, “Prologue.” In *The Kingdom of This World*, 1949.

who became a mentor and to whom *Revolution Sunday* is dedicated. In fact, he is written into the plot of the novel. This begs the question, does Guerra write Magical Realism? Where does Guerra fit into the context of Latin American literature?

In a place like Cuba that has a sense of secrecy and control— a country that is ruled by its revolution— many may say that truth is relative. Guerra writes heavily on this phenomenon: the fantastical fear, the censorship, the paranoia. Her fantastical depictions of the raids and the surveillance of Cleo's home have recognizable overlap with Magical realism. But her stories do not include inexplicable years of rain, nor parrots who can do arithmetic, nor children who are born with pig tails. Within the recent historical context of Cuba, Guerra's purpose as an author may be to tell her own truth in the face of this paranoia and fear. Yet, how true is it? Guerra writes fiction, not nonfiction, and fiction is not entirely truth.

Different modes of writing can be used to examine important moments in history. The nonfiction writer will utilize careful organization of fact to keep the reader engaged, and the fiction writer will make valuable exaggerations of fact to emphasize certain aspects of the human condition. Nonfiction allows writers to tell the stories of individuals clearly and with an argument. Fiction allows writers to tell their own stories, or at least their lived experience, through careful adjustments of the truth paired with compelling literary devices. History and storytelling are inevitably intertwined, and sometimes storytelling can make up for what history has forgotten.

Women's stories in Cuba have been historically underrepresented, especially in the large shadow of the Revolution. Comparing the analysis of contemporary fiction and historical nonfiction of Cuba allows for a deeper understanding of the complicated stories of its citizens, especially those of women as they discuss gender, class, and race. Within the context of Latin

American Literature, a story of an oppressive Cuba emerges in Wendy Guerra's two autobiographical novels—*Everyone Leaves* (*Todos se van*) and *Revolution Sunday* (*Domingo de revolución*)— and is ultimately shaped by the main characters' and simultaneously the author's whiteness, womanhood, and her position in society.

There is no singular autobiography of Wendy Guerra that her novels can be compared to. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that her work is autobiographical. According to John Lee Anderson in his piece "Private Eyes" in *The New Yorker*, *Everyone Leaves* "is a thinly veiled autobiography: the journal of a young woman who feels betrayed by a succession of men in a male-dominated country, and oppressed by the conformism of the Revolution."⁴ While this description is about the character of Nieve in the novel, it could also easily be applied to the author herself. Therefore, any apparent overlap between the author and the main characters should be considered, especially as she discusses the role of the writer within Cuba. These are also somewhat natural assumptions that readers will make about her life and the time period through her fiction. As the writer Alice Munro comments about her own autobiographical fiction, it is "autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact."⁵ At the very least, Guerra's level of autobiography lands in this definition. One should not read her novels as true autobiographies, but rather should extract her very real opinions about the Cuban system that manifest in her characters.

It is also important to address that Wendy Guerra's work is not published in Cuba. Specifically, her novels are banned. This censorship becomes a major theme in her work, making restriction a framework for her novels. Most scenes are either set outside of the country or inside

⁴ Jon Lee Anderson, "Private Eyes." *The New Yorker*, October 14, 2013, 15
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/21/private-eyes>.

⁵ Charles McGrath, "The Sense of an Ending." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, November 16, 2012.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/books/review/dear-life-stories-by-alice-munro.html>.

her home, where she constantly feels watched. But is this censorship true for all Cubans? Do all citizens of this country live with cameras in their homes and secret police knocking down their doors? Parts of her novels will make you believe so, but it's understanding the context of Guerra's characters as white women and artists that will help to answer this question. In order to place her attitude about the Cuban Revolution in the spectrum of opinions, it is necessary to take into account the privilege within her social standing.

Everyone Leaves is written in the form of a diary, the diary of a young girl, Nieve Guerra. Guerra chooses to give her character her same last name, clearly linking herself to the protagonist. The diary begins in the late 1970's and follows Nieve from around age nine to post-high school. Her childhood is a custody battle, as she moves between living with her absent artist mother and abusive father. Both of her parents are constantly trying to leave Cuba, until her father finally does, and she lives permanently with her mother in her teenagehood. As a teenager, she goes to The National Art School and after graduation, begins a relationship with an older artist, Osvaldo, until he eventually leaves the country. At the end of the work, Nieve feels as if everyone important to her has left the country and the focus of the work shifts from the confusion of Cuban childhood and towards the loneliness and apathy she feels as an adult.

Everyone Leaves is very critical of Cuba. This critique is immediately apparent with the work's epigraph. Guerra quotes Anne Frank's diary, "We wouldn't have to give a moment's thought to all this suffering if it weren't for the fact that we're so worried about those we hold dear, whom we can no longer help."⁶ Guerra may have chosen this quote to begin her work for two reasons. First, a main theme of the novel is abandonment or loss of loved ones and the quote encapsulates this struggle. Second, in some way, Guerra may be comparing Nieve's situation, and therefore her situation, to the plight of Anne Frank. The link between the two works is the

⁶ Wendy Guerra, and Achy Obejas. *Everyone Leaves*. Las Vegas, NV: AmazonCrossing, 2012.

diary form, but Guerra's work is a constructed one while Anne Frank's is not. This comparison both strengthens one's understanding of the autobiographical nature of the work and also reveals the level of gravity that belongs to Cuban life in Guerra's eyes.

The very concept of a diary already connotes secrecy. People keep diaries in order to take account of their lives, but also to make plain their secrets, and in this case, dangerous opinions. Nieve opens the novel after the epigraph explaining that she "can't be like just any other woman, because [she doesn't] belong to this world." She "takes refuge" in the diary, she "only feel[s] comfortable and normal within its pages."⁷ This is her adult voice commenting on the diary as a whole before it begins, emphasizing how influential not only the diary was in constructing her womanhood, but the oppression of the Revolution that she feels as well. As a child, Nieve believes that her "mother would die of fear" if her mother knew that she quotes "her verbatim in [her] Diaries" and asserts that she hides her "Diaries in the loft at home, under the boards."⁸ This sense of concealment does perhaps link back to the Anne Frank epigraph, however in this case, it is not a body or person that is being hidden from an oppressive state, but rather the diary, a physical manifestation of ideological conflict. Guerra is arguing that while you may have freedom over your physical self, you do not have freedom over your thoughts, but the diary form allows her to express these thoughts onto the physical plane. For example, Nieve states, "I'm on a Diary strike because they sent my mother to war in Angola. This page is blank in her honor" and a stark white page follows.⁹ Here, one can understand Nieve's anger visually. Without words, she can let her critical understanding of Cuba manifest on the page. If the fictional diary serves this purpose for Nieve, does the novel serve the same purpose for Guerra? By making the format of this critical novel a diary, something secret and intimate, Guerra's own secrets and intimate

⁷ Guerra, *Everyone Leaves*, 1

⁸ Guerra, 120

⁹ Guerra, 9

thoughts are revealed. The novel goes one step further however. The novel allows for her thoughts to be extracted from Cuba and circulated around the world. The physicality of the diary as a novel is one way in which Magical Realism appears in Guerra's world. When Guerra chose to write a novel that is a diary, it belongs inside the plot, but can also be held in the reader's hands. The novel is a part of our reality through some magical transference. This makes the oppression and difficulties of Nieve's life even more real.

The point of view and voice is another greatly important tool of the effectiveness of its critique. The first half, titled *The Childhood Diary*, has the voice of Nieve as a child. Because it is written in first person point of view and in a diary form, her words feel straight from her mouth. There is a sense of childhood ignorance and confusion that accompanies the first half of the work: confusion about her parents, her own life, and the nature of Cuba. Her child-voice allows her to bring up issues of the state without having to dive into explaining them. For example, when her mother loses custody of her and she has to go live with her abusive father, she describes how "a woman took [her] there by the hand, twice saying, 'the revolution won't abandon you,'" then her child-self's perspective stating, "I don't know what the revolution has to do with any of this."¹⁰ She quickly moves on from this interaction, but here one can see the Revolution breaking through into her consciousness, even though she doesn't know where to place it. Because of the government's handling of her case she must live in a worse situation, giving this woman's comment, a government worker, an ironic tone in the reader's understanding. At other times, her voice in this first half takes on the tone of a scared child. When Nieve believes she is being watched by the government, she confesses, "I don't know if it's true or not, but it's crucial to be careful. I haven't done anything wrong in these last few months.

¹⁰ Guerra, 25

I've behaved better than ever. I swear.”¹¹ This sounds as if she is pleading with a strict parent, but instead she is pleading with the invisible and ever-present parent of the Revolution.

The second half of the novel is titled *The Adolescent Diary*. In this section, her voice has aged. There is a feeling of angst, as there are in many teenager’s voices, as well as more outright disenchantment with the Revolution. For instance, she writes, “Today they're taking us to a military training camp. Since we can't ruin our hands working in the fields because we're the artistic future of the nation, they've decided to swap out the required 145 school days doing farm work with the same number of days at the school of military preparation.”¹² There is a sarcastic tone to this statement. One could read it more straightforwardly, but knowing how Nieve feels about the government, there’s a slightly bitter inflection. This is also the age where she begins to understand the differences in generations in Cuba. This character would have been born in the early 1970’s, similar to Guerra, making her part of the generations that were born after the Revolution and were not part of the initial “spirit” of 1959. Nieve writes:

My mom says my generation loves gregariousness. She says we don't understand the I, just the We. I imagine that's because we're their kids and they're the generation of May '68, the miniskirt, the gigantic mobilizations on those farm trucks for the sugar harvest, the park off the funeral home where they tattooed each other without anesthetic, the houses where 15 kids would cram into one room to listen to the Beatles, who were more banned than meat. They're the pure product of the sixties...But we live somewhere between what's prohibited and what's required. We don't really have that spirit of solidarity they had back in the sixties. (Guerra, 114)

Here, Nieve puts words to the interesting generational differences in Cuban society, but is also commenting on how the Revolution changes over the years and how in reality, the Revolution is shaping these generational trends. It seems that Nieve can romanticize her mother’s youth but not her own, where she *does* feel a bit abandoned by the revolution, as that government worker promised would not happen as a child. By the end of the novel, she is living alone, left behind by

¹¹ Guerra, 11

¹² Guerra, 125

her father, friends, and finally her boyfriend, Osvaldo, who essentially abandoned her without warning. Even the title *Everyone leaves* clearly shows her understanding of life in Cuba. Here, one can see how her feelings of abandonment by the people she loves and by the Revolution accumulate into a pessimistic tone in the work. This is one of the harshest critiques Guerra could give; In a country that prides itself on its community and collectivity, this woman feels nothing but isolation and desertion.

There is an interesting link between *Everyone Leaves* and her other novel *Revolution Sunday*. Towards the end of *Everyone Leaves*, the character of Cleo is introduced to Nieve as a friend of Osvaldo. She is a poet and a writer, who had recently published a book in Spain— just like the main character of *Revolution Sunday*, who is a poet named Cleo and recently published a book in Spain. Perhaps predictably at this point, Wendy Guerra is also a poet, who began her career by publishing a book in Spain. However, Cleo in *Everyone Leaves* is another friend who ends up leaving Cuba. While Cleo in *Revolution Sunday* does a bit traveling, she ends up remaining in Cuba. It's unclear whether Guerra intended these characters to be a continuation of each other or whether she decided to reuse her name and general story. However, there is some overlap. Nieve writes about Cleo, “the night that [she] finished reading me the end of her story, I realized that she'd been planning her escape. It's impossible to tell so many truths and continue to live in Cuba. She is unpublishable here.”¹³ This addresses the struggles of being a writer in Cuba, which is one of the main struggles of Cleo in *Revolution Sunday*. Furthermore, it shows that Guerra may see herself in multiple female characters, not only the narrators of her novels; She is all of the Cuban women.

Timewise, *Revolution Sunday* picks up where *Everyone Leaves* left off. The main character, Cleo, is in her late twenties or early thirties and is a writer living in Havana. With these

¹³ Guerra, *Revolution Sunday*, 204

two novels, all ages of Wendy Guerra's life has been covered: childhood, adolescence, and now adulthood. The novel takes place in the late 2000s, when the extreme poverty of the Special Period was declining. Where in *Everyone Leaves*, Nieve struggles with this poverty, Cleo belongs more to the upper class. She lives alone in a large house, has a housekeeper, and doesn't work except for writing. Cleo is dealing with an ideological struggle instead of a financial one. She wins a prize in Spain and has her book published there. She visits Spain, then after, she goes to Mexico where she rekindles an old relationship with an ex-boyfriend, Enzo, and other Cuban exiles living there. She begins to build a life there, but then is accused of being a spy for the Cuban government by these people. They were "planting doubts, creating divisions with false clues, using rumours to win." Cleo concludes, "there's nothing worse than a communist who's been let down by communism."¹⁴

While Cleo is in Mexico, Guerra begins to explain the plight of being a Cuban writer. She shares an essay she wrote with Enzo and his friends, stating that the voice of the essay was of "a person who has no interest in being brave but who sees herself forced to confront her fears when she has to defend herself as she contends with the reality inside Cuba."¹⁵ Guerra seems to be describing herself in this quote. Her own position as an anti-revolution Cuban writer manifests in Cleo's character. Through Cleo's voice, she comments on censorship, "being read, honored, translated into several languages doesn't matter if you're not recognized in your own country, if you can't find your original readers, you can't share your work with your own people."¹⁶ But is Wendy Guerra's audience really other Cubans? Is she really writing for her "own people?" If *Everyone Leaves* is an inward look into Cuban life, then *Revolution Sunday* is an outward look into the world from the perspective of a Cuban citizen. The implied audience for this novel

¹⁴ Guerra, 23

¹⁵ Guerra, 26

¹⁶ Guerra, 41

seems to be non-Cubans, as she is trying to explain her life experience as a Cuban to inform and to freely comment on its difficulties.

Because of her solitary life as a writer who is critical of the Revolution, she is subject to surveillance and censorship. Cleo remarks, “where it says house, it should say prison.”¹⁷ While not written in the diary format, this novel is written in the first person point of view and has a confessional tone, which allows for a similar feel to a diary. She describes having cameras in her home, being visited by secret police, and having inspections done on her computer. Yet, each time she describes any type of surveillance, she switches to second person point of view:

There's a brusque knock at the door. If you don't open it, they change their tactics: a good kick or set of elegant master keys will serve to unlock it, depending on whether you're a Cuban citizen without rights or a chance of being heard at any level, or, instead, if you're a diplomat of some other kind or foreigner who can file a legal complaint. The methods vary, depending on whether anyone will mourn your death or if you're a common and helpless mortal, in which case they destroy everything. If you're someone who matters to them, then they'll do it with care. (Guerra, 74)

And, again:

You look around your living room, check your bedroom, walk around the kitchen, and analyze the layout of your domestic life. They've applied their techniques here too. Where did they put the microphones? In the picture frames, in the decor, in your clock, in your cell phone, in your stereo equipment... Or did you really think they didn't spy on you? (Guerra, 56)

The use of the second person is an interesting technique. Commonly, the effect that this has on the reader is that they subconsciously place themselves in the role of the “you.” If Guerra is attempting to convey the feeling of surveillance and the oppression of the government, by using the second person the reader will fit themselves into this feeling. It implies that just one person, the narrator, knows what “you” are doing. As a reader, the novel is an experience of feeling paranoid and claustrophobic. Guerra concludes the second quote by saying, “the truth is that the real microphone— after years of whispering and refraining from saying what you think—

¹⁷ Guerra, 130

the real artifact is already inside you” (56). Maintaining the second person, she decides that part of being a Cuban citizen is being indoctrinated to not believe your own truth. But by being a Cuban writer, Guerra is able to alter and emphasize this reality by highlighting the censorship.

Another device that Guerra uses in *Revolution Sunday* is the insertion of full poems into the text. Some of these poems are from other poets, like *Tell the Truth*, by the controversial poet Heriberto Padilla, which advocates against this indoctrination:

At least, tell your truth.
And later
let anything happen:
let them tear your beloved pages,
let them knock your door down with rocks,
let the people
crowd around your body
as if you were
a prodigy or the dead.¹⁸

As a writer, Cleo identifies with this poem, validating her poetic urges to communicate her life and what she believes about Cuba through writing. She states, “my poetry is my magic protector against fear.”¹⁹ Perhaps this is a way in which the marvelous real or Magical Realism comes into her writing— through poetry. Poetry lives on a plane other than our reality. It is inherently personal and autobiographical, yet its entire purpose is to attempt to describe not only the truest facts of the human experience, but also the inexplicable magic of it. The majority of the poems are written by Cleo herself, or really Guerra, in an entire section titled “Cleo’s Poems,” at the end of the novel. She addresses this idea of poetry as magic in one of these poems, *A Cage Within*:

And she who is I wants to open the cage
cage that separates me from the living
But we were already yes a bit dead what
with everything and birds hungry for light
Dead from all the words silenced in the
darkness you have reached us

¹⁸ Guerra, 134: This poem was originally published in the Dissent Magazine, Spring 1973.

¹⁹ Guerra, 75

Ready to predict from the learned confinement
I strive to translate with vigor my letters engraved on
the body.²⁰

This poem contains themes of oppression, confinement, and a confession of autobiography, as she begins the poem with “And she who is I.” Perhaps this “she” is referencing all of her autobiographical female characters in her novels. But, it is the last line that conveys the marvelous, “I strive to translate with vigor my letters engraved on / the body.” This translation of these magical letters can be interpreted as the act of writing, breaking out of this “cage,” and recording her truth.

Guerra provides Cleo an escape from this reality in the plot of the novel, in a way that she could not do for herself. Cleo leaves Mexico and returns to Cuba, where she meets Geronimo, a Cuban-American actor. He is making a film about a forgotten figure of the resistance against the Revolution that he believes to be her father. Both of her parents have died, but through him she learns that the man who she thought was her father was not her biological father. Her biological father was executed for his beliefs and this news justifies her own beliefs in a way. The most shocking revelation is that Cleo was born in Washington D.C., making her an American citizen. This is a fairly charged decision on Guerra’s part, as Cleo is not just Cuban, but also American—almost the opposite of Cuban. Her identity as a Cuban citizen is altered and she is given a way out of Cuba. She begins a relationship with Geronimo as he makes the documentary, and eventually they go to New York for the premiere. There, he breaks off their relationship and Cleo learns that he used footage from the surveillance cameras that were placed around her house. Geronimo also gives a disclaimer for the film: “This film is a work of fiction, and is not inspired by actual events.”²¹ In a poem titled *Autofiction*, Cleo ruminates on this betrayal:

²⁰ Guerra, 184

²¹ Guerra, 176

Everything is apocryphal, my life is autofiction, and if I
write poetry, I returned to the original idea
... certain nights when I'm asleep, the child I was
returns, that girl I remember who hides
under my skirt without a handler or a straight jacket.

Everything is apocryphal and I'm a character in an
unfilmed movie, a version of my
wishes that doesn't even have my name.²²

Here, Guerra is saying what the reader has been thinking, that her work is a fictionalized autobiography. She references her girlhood, like in *Everyone Leaves*, that is filled with fear and lack of guidance. She ends the poem by reducing herself to the version of her in Geronimo's film, one that is lacking in individuality. Perhaps this is another metaphor for how she feels about Cuba—stripped of her individuality. As if Cuba was a man just like Geronimo, continually letting her down.

This betrayal is only one within a pattern of male character's betraying Guerra's female protagonists. Nieve's stepfather was taken away, her father abused her, and Osvaldo abandoned her for Europe. Cleo's father is dead, her biological father is dead, her first boyfriend Enzo believed she was deceiving him, and finally Geronimo gave her a new identity, only to completely discredit it. With a feminist lense, this pattern comments on women's struggles through negative experiences in interpersonal relationships with men. If these moments of disappointment and abandonment by men are an analogy for being Cuban, then her understanding of being Cuban is linked to her womanhood. Yet, in Guerra's novels there is no strife greater than being Cuban—not being a woman, being poor, being a person of color, or being all of these. Her work illustrates what being a Cuban citizen is in Guerra's opinion, but does it encapsulate what it means to be a Cuban woman?

²² Guerra, 184

For an even deeper understanding of life in Cuba and of Cuban womanhood, the stories of all Cuban women should be accounted for, especially poor women and women of color. Cuba, as many other former slave states, has a long history with racism. However, this racism looks very different from that of the United States. There was less segregation between races in Cuba than in the United States, making blackness an integral part of the Cuban population and culture. Yet, it holds true that stories of people of color, women especially, have gone through repeated erasure. During the slavery era, black women faced erasure in infinite ways. One instance is the black female slave's role in slave rebellions. Aisha Finch discusses the "designation" of the elusive rebel queen that led "alongside a rebel king," in *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba*.²³ While there are accounts of the rebel kings, it is less clear what it meant to be queen. Their stories are difficult to verify, as to avoid suspicion or punishment they "negated or deemphasized their role."²⁴ Slave women in these rebellions not only had their lives and their bodily autonomies to worry about, they also had their children and families' lives to protect. During this colonial period, women of color's stories could have contributed more greatly to understanding Cuban history, but instead this set a precedent for this erasure for the next era and beyond.

During the Republic era in Cuba, slavery had been outlawed, but racism was still very present. Enslaved people were given their freedom and the black population was more integrated into Cuban society, but there was still immense violence and discrimination. In addition, it was still favorable to be white and have white ancestry. For black women, one way to improve their social standing was to marry a white man. In *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*, Daisy Rubiera Castillo tells the life story of her mother, Reyita, through a

²³ Aisha K. Finch, "And the Women Also Knew: THE GENDERED TERRAIN OF INSURGENCY." Essay. In *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 158

²⁴ Finch, 163

series of interviews.²⁵ Reyita states that in the 1920s, while she was “proud to be black,” in “those days, marrying white was vital.”²⁶ She goes on to describe how she met her husband while she was working as a waitress at a hotel and he was a customer. They had a fairly odd first interaction, he “came running up the stairs behind [her], grabbed [her], and covered [her] in kisses.” He continued this “until [she] realized [she] loved him.”²⁷ She was highly sexualized by him, which unfortunately was a trend dating back to slavery times, when white slaveowners would subject female slaves to this type of assault. Their marriage was not unhappy, but Reyita was subject to racism by her husband’s family, colorism in reference to herself and her children, and infidelity by her husband. Nevertheless, Reyita found joy in her raising her children and many other children whose parents could not care for them. She states about the children she cared for, “if I point out that some of those children were white, it's to emphasize that the fundamental problem in Cuba was not just being black, but being poor.”²⁸ This is where her Revolutionary spirit manifested, tied to her womanhood and motherhood, with understanding the solidarity between everyone within the poorer population, regardless of race.

This is an important concept in understanding the Revolution. For example, Oscar Lewis tells the story of Pilar in *Four Women: Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba*.²⁹ Her story, compiled from interviews, is best summarized by her own words:

“A girl like me, from a poor family with never enough to eat, well, she had only two ways to go, the brothel or domestic service. I went to the brothel; there was more money in it. But how I detested it! And detested myself even more! Believe me, if it hadn’t been for the Revolution I’d be dead by now. It was my salvation.” (Lewis, 237)

²⁵ Daisy Rubiera Castillo, “Chapter 2.” Essay. In *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Pr., 2000.

²⁶ Castillo, 59

²⁷ Castillo, 60

²⁸ Castillo, 72

²⁹ Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon. “Pilar.” Chapter. In *Four Women: Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Here, one can see the difficulties of poverty in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, and specifically, the difficulties for poor women. Her combined poverty and womanhood created a situation in which she felt her option was to utilize her body, either in a sexual or domestic context. Once the Revolution happened, revolutionaries gave aid to sex workers and Pilar was able to gain healthcare, education, a new job in a factory, and eventually, she received her own home as well. Pilar was white, or at least wasn't considered black, but it was her poverty and participation in the Revolution that helped her out of her situation. All of Guerra's female characters are white and do not live at this level of poverty. Even so, her novels take place entirely after the Revolution, the first taking place twenty years after the Revolution, so how do her character's stories compare to historical accounts from the same time period?

Historical first hand accounts of regular citizens of Cuba can accomplish telling the stories of those forgotten in history, but are in contrast to Guerra's fiction. Her characters and their experiences can be compared to these people and their stories. In *The Cubans: Ordinary Lives in Extraordinary Times*, Anthony DePalma interviewed citizens of Cuba and compiled their life stories into a work of nonfiction.³⁰ The women that he writes about are of different races, but each of them have their own struggles, either racism or sexism, and often both, but all of their lives are framed by the Revolution.

Whether benefiting from the Revolution or feeling burdened by it, these women's stories are undeniably marked by their place in society. For example, Mari is a woman who came from a somewhat wealthy white family. She is Catholic and therefore could not be a member of the Communist Party. "Mari had challenged [the] entire system, and she paid a dear price for it. She was denied the kind of education she desired, the career she longed for, and the promotions that

³⁰ Anthony DePalma, *The Cubans: Ordinary Lives in Extraordinary Times*. New York: Penguin Books, 2021.

would have recognized her skills.”³¹ Being a religious woman at this time prevented her from becoming successful in terms of the Revolution. In her story, Cleo is also wealthy and white, but was not religious, and therefore did not face these kinds of disadvantages. She did not have to work to support herself nor ever had to face a lack of food. Mari was assigned to work with fishermen, doing quality testing and inventory, but during the special period, she “was in a compromising position” and recounts that she considered stealing from the “fantastic bounty of fish” that she had access to.³² While Mari has the benefit of being white, her religion worked against the privileges that she could have received from the Revolution.

Another woman, Zenaida, was a poor black mother of twin girls. Because they are a family of black women, we can see the stark contrast of race in comparison to Guerra’s characters, who does not write about many people of color. Zenaida was humiliated as a girl by a white family when she was working for them in domestic service. She does everything in her power to not experience this again nor let her daughters be humiliated as black women. She comments on these events saying, “that happened to me because I was a poor black girl without much education.”³³ Zenaida was eventually able to get an apartment from the government after many years of labor. Cleo did not have to worry about where money was coming from or where she was going to live. Nieve and her mother were not wealthy and did have to move around frequently, similarly to Zenaida. But because Nieve’s mother was opposed to the Revolution, she didn’t feel compelled to take advantage of the opportunities the Revolution could give a white woman of her abilities.

Once Zenaida’s daughters were older, the government was making positive changes for “young people like her twins,” that they “would not be held back because of the color of their

³¹ DePalma, 48

³² DePalma, 71

³³ DePalma, 20

skin. Nor would being girls in a macho Latino society keep them from realizing their dreams, so long as they worked hard and got an education.”³⁴ One of her daughters, Cary, did accomplish this notion. She went to university in Kiev, Ukraine and became an economic engineer. She got married and moved back to Cuba, became a card-carrying member of the Communist Party and got a job. DePalma describes how “as a young black woman at a time when the government’s affirmative-action policies were vigorously enforced... Cary kept moving up at the ministry and within the party.”³⁵ Her and her husband eventually earned a three bedroom apartment and had a family. Later, she was transferred to a different job, managing an aluminum factory, where “the plant’s employees—more than one hundred—were men, Cuban men who were not used to taking orders from any woman, let alone one who was just thirty-six years old, and black.”³⁶ In Guerra’s novels, she does not write any characters that are struggling with this type of issue, let alone broach the topic of race or racism. There are even moments where Guerra slips into racial tropes. She describes Margara, Cleo’s longtime housekeeper, as “a black butterfly” who “never once miss[ed] a day” of work. She also says that Margara is “sinewy” and can “move the heaviest furniture without breaking a sweat.”³⁷ These descriptions focus on Margara’s body and her ability to perform labor, all which have their roots in slavery, where black personhood was diminished to their labor. Throughout the novel, Margara is a mostly silent supporter of Cleo. She changes certain words in Cleo’s poems in order to protect her from censorship, but does not have much purpose beyond this in the book. Guerra could have written Margara as a more developed character, but instead writes a harmful depiction of black women as domestic laborers

³⁴ DePalma, 19

³⁵ DePalma, 59

³⁶ DePalma, 82

³⁷ Guerra, 78

into her novel. This representation of black women is a complete contrast to Cary in *The Cubans*, a strong and influential black woman.

However, DePalma does not write these women's stories in the form of an average historical account. They are written from a close third person point of view, meaning DePalma is telling the facts of their stories, but making inferences about their thoughts and feelings. We can take these thoughts and feelings and examine them against Guerra's fictional female characters. In both authors' modes of storytelling, one thing becomes very clear: stories like DePalma's concentrate on socially disadvantaged people to critique but also celebrate the Revolution, giving the reader a more nuanced insight into life in Cuba, while Guerra utilizes her characters' societal advantages to critique the Cuban system, ignoring certain aspects of Cuban life.

Guerra chose to tell the truth of her reality despite this, yet her Cuban peers are not able to read her work due to her censorship. It seems that what's most important is that her story is shared, even if it's outside of Cuba, and that it's engaging enough for people to care. By entering a fictional world like Guerra's, where there are cameras in your bedroom, secret police watching you on the street, and spies in your kitchen, reality is altered. That isn't to say things like this don't happen in Cuba, but Guerra's world does not epitomize Cuba. Her critique of the Revolution becomes like modern-day Cuban Magical Realism. But as Carpentier discussed, the marvelous real does not come from European culture, whiteness, or the upper class. He argues that it is Latin America's diversity, the cultures and religions of indigenous and black populations, that carries this magic. Guerra emphasizes the aspects of Cuban life that make Cuba into a tyranny, while disregarding these groups—their normality of life, their struggles, their magic.

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