

Anxieties of Impotence: Cuban Americas in New York City

Christina Marie Tourino  
*St. John's University*

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**CLCWeb Volume 4 Issue 2 (June 2002) Article 11****Christina Marie Tourino,****"Anxieties of Impotence: Cuban Americas in New York City"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/11>>

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Anxieties of Impotence: Cuban Americas in New York City," Christina Marie Tourino seeks a basis for comparison between Latin American literatures and Latino literatures of the United States. Such groups have rarely been compared in the past because they are considered part of the same literary "family." However, Tourino argues that owing to the flows of capital driven by global pressures, literatures between and among Latin Americans and Latinos hail from such culturally heterogeneous sites and are made over by so many relocations that they do call for comparative projects. Instead of comparing texts across national or ethnic lines, then, Tourino's project attends to texts that spring from related but different sorts of departures, dislocations, languages, and constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class, then seeks what "family" resemblance still obtains. As a test case, Tourino looks at two texts that descend directly from Cuba and are produced in New York: Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989) and Reinaldo Arenas's *El asalto* (1990). What Tourino discovers is that, despite radical differences in the class, politics, sexuality, language, and political disenfranchisement of the text's protagonists (and even their authors), both of these texts posit a fantasy of excessive masculinity as the source of an all-male family that reproduces itself without women -- a fantasy whose freneticism points to a masculine anxiety over its own emptiness that seems to be performed in related ways in much Latino and Latin American literature.

**Christina Marie TOURINO**

**Anxieties of Impotence: Cuban Americas in New York City**

Industrialization, globalization, and US economic and foreign policy have set unprecedented numbers of bodies in motion across national borders. Along with other dependent nations, tribes, and continents, Latin America has seen many of its citizens migrate, immigrate, and go into exile. As a result of such movements over the last century and a half, Latin Americans are dispersed in such a way that related but different cultural groups spring up in many parts of the world, many of them in the United States. These groups continue to evolve as increasingly complicated flows of subjects and their capital make ceaseless round trips in which "home" and "abroad" become harder and harder to name. For critics of Latin American literatures, this state of affairs irreversibly complicates comparative literature projects. Comparative Literature as a discipline has changed dramatically from its earliest moments in the nineteenth century, when its project was to search for literary influences and universal themes in European literatures of the Middle Ages. In the early twentieth century, comparative literature began to be invested in the definition of national characteristics. Projects compared European literatures across national and linguistic boundaries in an attempt both to unearth universal themes and to register national and linguistic specificities (see Bassnett 24). More recently, in addition to Europe, the United States and its literature entered the purview of legitimate comparative study. The complete upheaval of literary study in the 1960s and 1970s has resulted in an interest in postcolonial literatures, which has, in turn, demanded models of comparative literature that work across national boundaries within the "Americas" hemispherically considered. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, groundbreaking projects in this newly developing comparative field of "inter-American literature" or the "literature of the Americas" compared texts across an Anglo/Latin divide (often including Canada as well). Studies comparing the works of William Faulkner with those of Gabriel García Márquez, or Henry James and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis exemplified this approach (Fitz; Pérez-Firmat; Zamora; Saldívar; Chevigny; Laguardia). Such studies sometimes undertook comparisons of modernist Latin American texts with "ethnic" texts from the US in order to locate ways in which both groups challenged US political and cultural colonialism.

This type of comparison also has problems, however, and these have been called into question by bilingual and bicultural critics. George Yúdice warns that Latin American texts are not analogous to US ethnic texts. Carlos Fuentes, for example, is often recruited in the US academy as "representative" of Mexico and is compared with US ethnic authors, even though he has nothing to do with Mexico's non-hegemonic groups. This imbalance has largely to do with uneven networks of dissemination and reception in which US enterprises and universities mediate the flow of Latin American cultural products into the US in ways that have no counterpart in Latin America. Some recent studies have been more sensitive to the complications involved in comparing non-hegemonic writings of the Americas, and have even broken out of binary comparisons altogether. Still, each of these approaches depends upon the coherence of "national" or "ethnic" groups as the basis for comparison. In this paper, I would like to take seriously the increasingly complicated inter- and intra-national cultural migrations described above, and consider another model for comparative literature of the Americas that jettisons "different" national or ethnic categories as a prerequisite altogether.

In his article, "Latin, Latino, American," Román de la Campa argues that "global pressures foreshadow a new cartography of the Americas" (376) in which the category "Latinos" blurs almost beyond recognition the North/South divide as it is construed by American Studies and Latin American Studies. "Latino," according to De la Campa, does have a coherent referent, "an ontological plurality that comes from deriving an identity from more than one American imaginary, an aspect that has specific importance for all Latino groups, regardless of national, racial, or ethnic origin" (377). Still, he argues that "Latino" is itself a "split state," a permanent and distinct Latino/Latin American diaspora "nurtured by the constant flow of capital -- human, symbolic, and financial -- between the Americas" (377). I am suggesting that literatures between and among Latin Americans and Latinos, then, hail from such culturally heterogeneous sites and are made over by so

many re-locations that they call for comparative projects. Instead of the national or ethnic group, this paper takes as a point of departure the cultural divergences set in motion by the global flow of capital. Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989) and Reinaldo Arenas's *El asalto* (1990) both descend from Cuba and are born in New York, but their authors come from groups that have migrated in response to very different pressures. Hijuelos is a second generation immigrant of parents who came to the US voluntarily. His protagonists, the Castillo brothers, also immigrated to New York voluntarily in 1949. Cubans of that generation were joining Cuban communities that had been established the century before. This group consisted of mainly Caucasian intellectuals, politicians, musicians, and others who had assimilated and escaped prejudice largely directed at other ethnics of color. In Miami, these early Cubans were wealthy and came as such a large group that they enjoyed quite a bit of economic and political power. They also continued to look forward to the possibility of a post-Castro return to the island. The Cubans who came during the 80s and 90s, in contrast, were often lower in class status and were part of a marginal ethnic or racial group (de la Campa, 379). Arenas was in some ways the most marginalized of these: he fled Cuba on the Mariel boatlift in order to escape persecution by Castro's revolution both for his outspoken defiance of Castro in his writings, and for being gay (a "crime" for which he spent many years in a labor camp). Arenas's writings are often autobiographical and depict young gay Cuban men in similar dire circumstances. Hijuelos himself is conservative and straight; Arenas is nearly anarchistic and gay. Hijuelos lives and writes openly in New York; Arenas was censured in Cuba. Hijuelos is relatively independent, while Arenas was dependent upon the elites of both the US and Cuba. In comparing these two works, I want to discover what persists in "Latin" culture despite transformations due to radical departures, dislocations, languages, and differing constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Hijuelos's *Mambo Kings* won a Pulitzer Prize and reviewers and critics highly praised it for nostalgically evoking a historical moment in New York when Latin culture was glorified in the US mainstream because of the sheer energy and beauty of its music (see Kanellos; Pérez-Firmat). Popular reviews of Arenas's *El asalto* emphasized Arenas's defense of individual rights, while academic critics cite the text as an example of Arenas's "irreducible liminality" and his "unmanageable body of difference ... that refuses to comfort the reader" (Ávila 110-13). Whether in celebration of the "ethnic" or in rebellious assertion of unmanageable difference, these authors have been received as oppositional Latins in the Anglo world. Yet in the same way that Boom narratives may have used magical realism to reinstate colonial relations between the elite intelligentsia and the masses (Colás), these "oppositional" narratives by Hijuelos and Arenas may be reinstating colonial relations themselves. Yúdice points out that within Latin America, beyond a shared repugnance for US imperialism, there is often an interior colonization along other lines such as race, ethnicity and sexual preference by those Latin American intellectuals with entrenched class privilege (203). What interests me here is the way in which both Hijuelos and Arenas narrate stories that depend upon a male colonization of women.

Despite differences in sexuality, politics, marginal status (immigration vs. exile), and language, Hijuelos and Arenas both posit a fantasy of excessive masculinity as the source of an all-male family that reproduces (or repeats) itself without women. This fantasy may function to compensate for the powerlessness that a marginalized man faces (to differing degrees) as an immigrant or an exile. In an attempt to assimilate and survive in the adopted country, immigrant men are often frustrated in their maintenance and reproduction of the patriarchal culture of their home country. For an exile, this alienation is even more extreme; for a gay man, already exiled from the nuclear reproductive family, it is more extreme still. Alongside this excessive masculinity, this fantasy also points to what is most "Cuban" in these characters. That is, Hijuelos and Arenas write the identities of these protagonists as masculine and as particularly "Cuban" at the same narrative sites. Although Hijuelos's protagonist is straight, and Arenas's is gay, both exemplify this "ethnic" and masculine excess. Hijuelos writes in English about Cesar Castillo and his brother Nestor, mambo musicians from Havana, Cuba, who immigrate to the United States in 1949 on the eve of the mambo heyday in New York. Hijuelos's characters suffer very few of the indignities facing most immigrants. They are talented, charismatic, and though they are meat packers by day, they quick-

ly develop devoted nighttime fans, and soon Cesar is sleeping his way through every woman in the city. Arenas writes a dystopic novel in Spanish that imagines what a future under Castro might look like in which all citizens live with the threat of execution for the slightest intellectual or sexual deviancy. Arenas's unnamed narrator has managed to escape the total loss of humanity that plagues most citizens under the dictatorship; however, he poses as a devoted member of the revolution (complete with the violent murder of many "treasonous" Cuban citizens) in order to gain enough mobility to satisfy the alarming desire that drives the entire narrative -- to find and execute his mother. Both texts are repetitious and episodic. Hijuelos's writes about a Don Juan who conquers women but never gets domestic with them; Arenas's narrator, though closeted, systematically slaughters one gay man after another. In both cases, the performance of Cuban masculinity in the face of its loss -- a performance that accomplishes the repetition, if not the reproduction, of Cuban culture -- is simultaneous with the (sometimes violent) exclusion of women. Biron describes a similar dynamic in terms of Latin American literary self-generation. She cites Sommer's argument that high modernist boom narratives must construct themselves as having been birthed without recourse to feminized and "popular" national romances (Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*). If, as Biron suggests, Latin American authors suffer from anxiety of influence in the face of low-brow literature, many of their characters suffer from anxiety of impotence in the face of women's generative power. Whether erotic picaresque or despotic picaresque, these heroes live in an all-male fantasy of extravagant self-expansion that never has to take recourse to biological motherhood.

The bravado, freneticism, and exuberance of these all-male fantasies is fueled by a masculine anxiety that seems to appear repeatedly in literatures about men genealogically related to the Caribbean or Latin America. I do not mean to suggest that Latin men are more sexist (or uniquely so) than men found in other regions such as Asia, Africa, or North America. I do, however, see that sexism play out in a particularly exaggerated and performative mode. Before reading texts by Hijuelos and Arenas, I would like briefly to digress and consider a few other texts of Latin cultural heritage that are produced from widely varying degrees of social disenfranchisement and political investments that flesh out the "family resemblance" of masculine impotence that interests me here. These authors range from conservative to leftist, immigrant to exile, and gay to straight. Still, their texts all engage in narratives of masculinity, which appear in Hijuelos and Arenas as well, where men work out their cultural and masculine identities on a field of women. Recurring versions of this masculinity involve a love/hate relationship with the mother, impotence in the face of women, performances of self-birthing, and exaggerated sexual prowess.

In his short story "My Life as a Redneck," Cuban American Gustavo Pérez-Firmat gives voice to an anxious Cuban-born male living in North Carolina. His anxiety centers on mothers, a fear that he locates geographically in the threatening waters engulfing his homeland: "Cuba is a body of land, smaller than a continent, surrounded by mothers on all sides. Big mothers. Mean mothers. Total mothers. No Cuban is an island because we're all caught and connected in the great chain of maternal being" (223). "Mother" as it is invoked here is an obscene insult, pointing to something grotesquely outsized and hostile. The narrator overtly names male anxiety of entrapment, impotence and loss saying, "Cuba is a feeble phallic epiphenomenon awash in the endless mothering ocean" (224). Speaking of his own actual mother, the narrator says, "A mother she was, a real mother. Lovely and lethal and overweight" (223). The narrator's fear of Cuban mothers and the sexual inadequacy it invites leaks into his marriage and inspires a compensatory affair. The narrator's wife is a Cuban mother herself; and, in an attempt to escape their sexless marriage, he has an affair with his American secretary, Catherine. Everything about the affair is epic in proportion. Initially the narrator is so afraid that he fails to achieve an erection, the atraso that sets in as a result of protracted abstinence is "monumental" (227), and the sex, once successful, is nothing less than a vehicle for the narrator's cultural immersion: "Sleeping with her was like making cross-over dreams come true. I was bewitched, bewildered, and bicultural" (228). The affair even takes over his working life as an academic literary critic: "For several months, pheromones suffused the rarefied air around Cultural and Literary Studies (Clit Studies for short). I had finally understood what the pleasure of the text was all about. My life in theory devolved into the most frenetic kind

of praxis" (232). Despite his obvious adoration of his secretary, she functions as a field on which the narrator acts out his sexual, cultural, and even professional exploits. Tail tucked between his legs, he goes back to his wife after a few months (he says that all Cuban husbands do), but he blames his own impotence for failing to make a complete break with the Cuban mother of his children. Even as a child, he overstayed his time inside his mother and, had he not been forcibly removed, he says that he would still be there, "softly boiling in Mami's ooze" (234). His wife receives him as the sea receiving driftwood, a metaphor that returns us to the overwhelmed "feeble phallic epiphenomenon" and aptly summarizes the narrator's sense of irrelevance.

Mexican American Richard Rodriguez also thematizes the threatening mother as metaphor for the country of origin in *Days of Obligation*. Although Rodriguez's subtitle is *An Argument With my Mexican Father*, and although his father is identified with a dark Mexican skepticism that Rodriguez is beginning to appreciate in his "American" self, it is the mother who appears over and over again in Rodriguez's arguments. Rodriguez tells us that his book is about California and Mexico, and then proceeds to set up a number of oppositions that describe the two places: comic and tragic, Protestant and Catholic, adoptive and parental, sterile and reproductive, future and past, public and private, masculine and feminine, even gay and straight. The measure of what he fears in a dangerous drift toward Mexico is the number of negative, ominous, and even sometimes sinister descriptions of the country. Rodriguez opens his book with a scene in which he literally vomits a Mexico that he simply cannot stomach: "bits and pieces of Mexico spew from my mouth, warm, half-understood, nostalgic reds and greens dangle from long strands of saliva" (xv). Mexico is female to the male migrant in Rodriguez' description of those who go north in search of better wages: "They were men without women. They were Mexicans without Mexico" (52). Mexico is also a prostitute: "Mexico laid down and the gringo paid in the morning" (88). She is the carrier of all that is foreign, dirty, disease-ridden, and chaotic (91). She is also embodied in a terrifying be-whiskered failure of femininity that tries to attack Rodriguez during his stay in Mexico: "An old hag with chicken skin on her arms grabs for my legs -- extravagant swipes, lobsterlike" (98).

According to Rodriguez, however, Mexico is more than anything an angry and abandoned mother who will return like the repressed: "Everything that America wants to believe about himself -- that he is innocent, that he is colorless, odorless, solitary, self-sufficient -- is corrected, weighed upon, glossed by Mexico, the maternity of Mexico, the envy of Mexico, the grievance of Mexico. Mexicans crossing the border are secret agents of matriarchy" (72). This fear of motherhood is mixed with a sense that for Mexico, adulthood is achieved by having children. Rodriguez describes an old beggar woman in Mexico, and understands her lack of grace as a result of her childlessness (77). Mother Mexico makes Rodriguez feel himself to be inadequate as a Mexican male not only because he has assimilated to American culture and language, but also because he is gay and has no children. Rodriguez narrates a scene in which he is sitting in a bar in Mexico City with five other Mexicans who are working on the film project with him. Among them is a Mexican woman who is the curator of the National Anthropology Museum. This woman scolds Rodriguez for his bad Spanish, and then impugns his masculinity, at once mimicking the embarrassment of Mexican Americans who can no longer speak much Spanish and suggesting Rodriguez' paltry manhood: "Poquito, Poquito" (74). She follows this by remarking on his childlessness, and the group decides to take him to a club where he can get some female attention. Again, Rodriguez fails to be manly. The singer approaches Rodriguez to sing to him during her act, inviting him to join. Although he writes earlier in the chapter that real macho Mexican men express their emotions most fully in song, here he sings grudgingly, just to get her to go away (77).

Chilean exile Ariel Dorfman, in his memoir *Heading South, Looking North*, rehearses the desire to flee the threatening mother and create oneself anew in a particularly guilt-ridden but clear way. Dorfman narrates a moment in his young life soon after arriving to New York in which he decides to refuse to speak Spanish and speak only English. He is provided with this opportunity because he suffers from an illness that requires a lengthy hospitalization and quarantine from his parents. He reflects in his memoir that he has been unable to access this turning point in order to discover why he rejected English as he did. Dorfman narrates this potentially benign frustration in a way that suggests rape: "We all desire to find out how we began, force the legs of memory open. ... I

thought I could ... access what had been my second birth, the moment when I mothered and fathered myself ... when I had created myself" (43). Later in his life, when he does an about face and decides to move back to Chile, speak only Spanish, and become part of the leftist community, his self-recreation again is inseparable from sex. Dorfman identifies Chile with his Chilean wife, and although he criticizes that move -- he complicates it, he retracts it -- it is, nevertheless, a starting point that he cannot resist narrating, and it is worth citing rather extensively: "Ever since I had met her, Angélica had been confused, in my mind, with Chile ... the hot sexual thought of a lithe moreno body under her dress ... How much of this I identified with the exotic Chile, the exotic Latin America that I had been secretly and transgressively hungering for all these many years, is anybody's guess. I experienced love through the metaphors available to males in Latin America -- and elsewhere -- at the time, no matter how suspect and gendered I may consider them now ... the woman as the earth, the earth goddess to be excavated, a territory to be explored by a pioneer, a land in which to root your manhood like a tree -- those were the images that surged inside me as we made love, I could never entirely rid myself of the feeling that I was somehow making mine something more than an individual woman, that I was making love to a community that was insider her" (178). Like Pérez-Firmat's narrator who experiences sex as a way to become American, Dorfman writes that, at least temporarily, his marriage to Angélica is what allowed him to feel Chilean after his mysteriously self-imposed assimilation to the US. In each case, women are more symbolic than real; mothers don't birth sons, wives provide raw material that facilitates male ethnic identity.

The US draws both Cuban immigrants and exiles with a promise of independence from poverty and political repression. Still, in the same way Rousseau's enlightenment philosophy allows for the continued subjugation of women through the theory of sexual complementarity, fictional freedom-seeking Cubans continue to exclude women from the Cuban ethnic/national group and the family through their constructions of masculinity. In both Hijuelos's and Arenas's novels, there is a complicated double ideology of masculinity at work. *Mambo Kings* presents two incompatible versions of proper Cuban American male identity: the macho and the domestic. The macho is expected to bed as many women as possible, while the domestic is expected to be a loyal family man and provider. In the novel, a cost free resolution between these two competing masculinities is achieved through the exclusion of women that operates in both to solidify an all-male family. Similarly, *El asalto* also describes two competing male types: the macho and the maricón. The macho is a soldier in Castro's revolution, completely devoted to the state, and ready to kill. The maricón, in contrast, is the worst deviant possible to both the revolution and the heterosexual reproductive family. By macho logic, since the maricón is the passive partner in gay sex, he is feminized and thus corrosive to the macho group. As Hijuelos brought together the macho and the domestic, Arenas also reveals the macho and the maricón to be more similar than different. Arenas argues that all men in Cuba engage in gay sex (the only difference being that the machos are active and maricones are passive), and thus the Cuban machos and the maricones more similar than different.

These contradictory masculinities are joined in their exclusion of women and the formation of an all-male family. Hijuelos accomplishes this with seduction, Arenas with assault, but both resolve contradictions between independence and sexism. In *Mambo Kings* the all-male family is, first, the mambo band, and later a Latin nightclub called Club Havana (these fictional families are echoed in the real-life Buena Vista Social Club. Both the music group and the documentary film include very few women. Further, the Buena Vista Social Club exemplifies the complicated flow of capital mentioned in the opening section of this paper. These aging musicians not only revived the popularity of Latin music in the US, their success in the US caused them to begin playing again in Havana, where Castro's government pays them a salary to play in cafés because they bring in tourists, many of them probably from the US. In this way, a Cuban male group reproduces Cuban culture). In *El asalto*, the all-male family is the army; whereas Arenas's other works trace versions of the all-male families such as young revolutionaries, men in work camps, and a genealogy of gay male writers that nurture Arenas artistically. These Cuban male groups are striking in their ethos of excess, both in terms of masculinity and cultural production (in this case, writing). In the most obvi-

ous and embodied site of excessive masculinity, each author narrates characters that describe themselves as having almost otherworldly organs. In *Mambo*, Cesar cavalierly acknowledges to the reader, "So I was led around by my penis, so what?" (53). For the Mambo King, sex is a form of cultural insertion that allows him to be successful in America without ever having to give up his Cuban-ness -- in fact, it is precisely his charisma as a Cuban male that facilitates his sexcapades. Cesar compares the veins of his erect penis to the Mississippi River and its tributaries (19) and its head to a Cortland apple (20), mapping his member directly onto the US landscape in a loving gesture of cultural conquest. Upon penetration, one woman "felt as if she were being occupied by a living creature the weight and length of a two-year-old cat" (299). Arenas's works also, *El asalto* above all, narrate the penis in an exaggerated, and often violent, way. In *Otra vez al mar*, Arenas writes a battle scene between Greeks and Trojans in which they use their penises to fight. In *El asalto*, the narrator, in an attempt to eradicate all gay men from the island, forms a team of soldiers to help entrap gays, but his choices obviously belie his own repressed gay desire: "I have chosen from the ranks of our agents those who are most physically fit and well endowed, those with long athletic legs, firm tread, and patent sexual endowment" (95).

Sexual excess, both literal and metaphorical, is central to both narratives. In Hijuelos's novel, Cesar's sex-drive is practically religious in the magnitude of its importance. In a footnote celebrating women's lingerie, Cesar speaks of panties as though they were the sacred objects of a sexual ritual invested with healing grace. Before his death, he performs a rosary-like recitation of the names of 57 women he has loved (394). He recalls, "A spectacular evening among so many spectacular evenings. How the rum flowed then, Jesus, how the bottles of booze multiplied along with the thick latex prophylactics and quivering female thighs like the miracle of fish and bread" (31). Here, Cesar revises Christ's miracle so that what is multiplied is not fish or bread, but booze, condoms, and female flesh. In Arenas's works also, sexual excess is the rule. In his memoir, *Antes que anochezca*, he reports that both in the Cuban countryside, and among Cuban revolutionaries in the 60s, most Cubans were sexually free and most men had sex with other men (19). Sánchez-Eppler writes, "From the emplacement of late-1980s New York, every bit of ostensibly marginalized Cuban sexuality will be paraded as the most often practiced thing in the world. Out in Arenas's rural home, sex with animals and sex with cousins of all genders, and even sex with uncles, will be represented as frequent, hardly exceptional, matter-of-fact" (166). Concerning the revolution, he continues, "The bus- and truckloads of young bodies fueling the grand revolutionary mobilization turn into an ecstatic and uninterrupted homoerotic feast" (173). In *El mundo alucinante*, the narrator describes a group of men frolicking and diving in an entire pool of semen.

The exaggerated importance of sex in *El asalto* is part of what gives the novel its dark humor. The narrator decides that it is his patriotic duty to punish any gay "pervert" who even looks in the vicinity of a man's crotch. The punishment is "Total Annihilation," which means that not only is the criminal executed, so is anyone associated with the criminal. Arenas stretches this to impossible proportions. A group of agents send a request to the narrator that they be "allowed to wear special blinders to keep them from being able to look down" in order to avoid committing the crime of perversion. The narrator responds, "El documento me encoleriza hasta tal extremo, que además de aniquilar a todos los que lo redactaron, garfearon, portaron, ojearon, etc., redactó un contradocumento que dice así ... el hecho de haber propuesto llevar unas orejeras, demuestra tal debilidad ideológica, que lo descubre, ante cualquiera, como vil depravado" (94) / "That document so enraged me that besides Annihilating all the agents that wrote it, touched it, carried it, caught sight of it, etc. I drafted a counterdocument which read as follows ... the fact of having proposed to wear blinders is prima facie proof of such ideological weakness that the proponent is revealed as a depraved and perverted criminal" (99). Although inflated sex organs and carnivalesque sex in these novels are outside of progeny and the hetero nuclear family, they are closely tied to the reproduction of culture. That is, while much of the sex talk in these novels is literal, the hypersex serves a more symbolic than physical function. This excessive Cuban masculinity is the way that these men at least repeat their culture, even if they cannot reproduce it. This obsessive repetition is both thematized in these novels, and mirrored in their narrative strategies. *Mambo* contains almost as many repetitive cultural forms as it does sex scenes. The mambo, itself a repetitive cul-



tural form, is immortalized in a short piece of film that was shot at the opening of Cesar's nightclub, Club Havana. The club eventually folds because Cesar cannot meet its financial obligations, but he tells us what happened to the film in an extended parenthetical that is, I think, a central aside: "And the film? The night's work resulted in only ten minutes of footage that would be shown at a festival in the Whitney Museum, and included a brief interview with Cesar ... he was saying, 'I came here with my younger brother in the late 1940s and we had a little band, the Mambo Kings. I composed with my brother a song, 'Beautiful Maria of My Soul,' and this caught the attention of the singer Desi Arnaz, who asked us to appear with him on his TV show *I Love Lucy*, do you know it?" And that ran in the film in a loop, jerking back to a point where he's first saying, 'Desi Arnaz, who asked us to appear with him on his TV show *I Love Lucy*.' Jerked back, it showed about ten times in quick succession. Then it cut to the same kind of loop of Pablito dancing the pachanga with his wife, the same steps being repeated over and over again in a jerky manner. It was shown many times in the viewing room of the Whitney, and then later in France, where it won a prize" (319).

As a loop, the film literally repeats both Cesar's proud relation to Arnaz and the dancing expertise of Pablito and his wife. The film loop, along with the mambo music and dance, jerk around repetitiously in ways that mirror the novel as a whole. Hijuelos's narrative is also decorated with jerky flourishes of the mambo -- Hijuelos's relentless return to the Hotel Splendour (which occurs no fewer than 35 times) is like a horn line in mambo music that becomes familiar through repetition. In novelistic repetitions of repetitions, the Hotel Splendour is a place where Cesar can relive to relieve. He even relives moments of reliving themselves, such as being at Club Havana, "listening attentively and feeling pleased by the repetition of certain events" (329), or being grateful to his final lover, Lydia, for making him feel "as if he would be able to relive and do certain things over again" (350). The real locus of this cultural repetition, and the axis upon which turn the film loop parenthetical and the novel itself, is the *I Love Lucy* show. The novel is anchored by an episode of the *I Love Lucy* sitcom in which the Castillo brothers were invited to perform (Hijuelos even repeats word for word, on pages 142 and 404, over a page of material that describes the nightclub performance). If Cesar, despite his energetic sexual activity, cannot reproduce, he can at least re-run, as it is Desilu's reruns that accomplish the repetition of Cuban American culture that Cesar is trying to achieve.

Arenas's repetitions occur both within his works and among them. Because the manuscript was either lost or confiscated, Arenas was literally forced to rewrite *Otra vez al mar* three times before the third version was successfully smuggled out of the country. The five novels of his *pentagonía* are an extended fictional autobiography; scenes from these are repeated and revised in his memoir *Antes que anochezca*. There are two alarming themes that are repeated throughout his works as well: a love/hate relationship between the narrator and the mother, and suicide. Sánchez-Eppler finds no fewer than twenty-seven separate mentions of suicide in *Antes que anochezca*, along with the suicide of the mother down the well in *Celestino*, and Héctor crashing his car at the mouth of the Havana Harbor Tunnel in *Otra vez al mar* (178). There are also many repetitions in *El asalto*. First, the name of the Castro/dictator character is the "Reprimerísimo," as though he were not simply a dictator, but intensely so, over and over again. Arenas also repeats the idea that under a dictatorship, even language and memory are taken from the people, until they can only grunt repetitive phrases that frustrate their ability to communicate. For example, the people must memorize a "Diálogo Universal Autorizado" for delivery at the Great Assembly for the Represiversary. The dialogue repeats "gar" and "Viva el Reprimerísimo" and "viva" over and over again (102). The government also writes a version for children in which they repeat "iJiuuuuu!" and "iJiaaaaaaa!" several times (96). In one scene, the narrator bumps into a female who tries vainly to make a connection with him by appealing to a recent episode in which they had made eye contact, a rare and illegal occurrence under the regime. She tries to speak with him, and to explain the basis for her come-on. The narrator relates the episode to us as both disgusting and absurd: "Y así sigue hablando que si yo al mirar ella mira que si me miró y yo la miré que qué sé yo qué al mirarla y ella mirarme. Y así que cuando tú me mirastes yo te miré ... y sigue: cuando te miré me mirastes y al mirarnos" (68) / "she goes on talking that way, saying that if when I looked

at her she looked back then we looked at each other and if we looked at each other then I looked at her when she looked at me, and that if when she looked at me I kept looking at her, well then ... and still she goes on talking: Because if you looked at me when I looked at you, and you kept looking at me even when I looked back at you" (69-70; italics in the original). Though dark, this evocation of the extreme and inane result of dictatorship is funny, and resonates with the film loop in *Mambo*. The limitations of context of the *Mambo* film -- its short length, the poignantly absurd recognition in France -- significantly deplete its meaning. In both Hijuelos and Arenas's texts, the anxious work of constructing masculinity (the sexy macho, the repressive revolutionary, and the closeted gay man alike) is exposed as empty as empty can be.

This suggests a critique of a socially-endorsed masculinity that betrays its failings for both men and women. Hijuelos's text is sometimes read as a sympathetic unmasking of machismo's pimples and warts. Most critics of Arenas's *El asalto* have taken it as a fiercely parodic undoing of masculinity and dictatorship (Biron) because Arenas depicts Castro's dictatorship as repressive, deadening, and grotesquely and hypocritically murderous. But in the case of both texts, this critique of masculinity surfaces only to be ultimately overridden by its complete re-mystification and redemption in the repetitive, performative, excessively masculine family. What is more, because this family depends upon the expulsion of the female, it cannot be benign. Instead, at the moment of the successful cohesion of Cuban culture under siege, colonial relations are instantiated anew vis-à-vis women.

In *Mambo*, this is a complicated argument to sustain because although some women in the text are angered by machismo, they are as often gratified. Cesar does once invoke an all-male family mantra in a moment of avuncular advice: "Women, boy, will ruin you if you're not careful. You offer them love, and what do you get in return? Emasculation" (223). He also rapes one woman. But relations with women in the novel are more often than not friendly; he generally seduces his female conquests, who are grateful for his visitation. Women in the novel help to justify machismo as a standard of male measure more than challenge it. Dolores, who in her marriage to Nestor and her association with the mambo orchestra is "a woman of intelligence and beauty literally trapped inside a crush of men" (170), still corroborates some of machismo's most deeply cherished maxims. Dolores is raped by an American man after a date, and she responds with anger, sadness, and shame. But even after she knows she will be raped, Dolores feels almost a fondness for the awkward ardor of her date. What finally disgusts Dolores, what betrays the pitiful character of the man, and what possibly even gives her the revenge of the last laugh (according to the novel) is the sight of the man's tiny penis: "And there it was, his member, slightly bent and wavering in the air. She thought, 'It's like a child's.' Something between a look of pity, mirth, and pure contempt crossed her face" (76). Dolores refuses to cooperate; her date ejaculates prematurely and must masturbate to help himself finish the job. That Dolores can be endeared by her date's passion even in the context of a rape, and that she loses this feeling only upon seeing the size of his penis, suggests her acquiescence to a standard of masculinity that uses the penis as the ultimate index measure. But it is Dolores' strategy for dealing with the rape that is most convincing on this point. She fantasizes about her own Cuban father's penis, a penis that is almost disembodied, its goodness not limited to the temporary realm of the flesh. As the rape progresses, she imagines it as she saw it one afternoon as her father lay sleeping naked, "his member, huge and powerful, an entity beyond the bodily weakness that would one day kill him" (76). Then, as the word "'virile' floated through her thoughts" (76), she began to flirt with a "sexual speculation about her father" (77). Dolores' response to the abuse of a tiny penis is to long for a huge and protective one, contrasting a pathetic, underdeveloped, North American masculinity with an excessively male, and potentially saving Cuban machismo.

The final action of *Mambo* remystifies masculinity as well. Despite the physical death and failure of the literal all-male family, the all male mambo band survives and self-replicates spiritually. At the novel's end, Eugenio (Cesar's nephew) is the only Castillo left. Eugenio's father dies in a car accident and his uncle Cesar commits suicide; abandoned and despondent, Eugenio goes to visit Desi Arnaz for some comfort. But Arnaz abandons him, too. Eugenio receives only polite hospitality, and he is painfully reminded that the kinship between the Mambo Kings and Desi was some-

thing scripted for a make-believe show. Eugenio is left without the male family he so desperately needs. But make believe begins to take on religious weight as it provides Eugenio with ecstasy, if not salvation. After Arnaz leaves him, Eugenio drifts into a religious reverie about the I Love Lucy show. In yet another repetition of the famous episode, Eugenio imagines it to be playing itself out right before his eyes. His dead father appears before him in the flesh (404), and, prayer-like, the text repeats word for word the Castillo's now mythic performance on Ricky Ricardo's stage. After the repetition of the re-run, Eugenio's vision continues in a religious vein as he imagines a mambo orchestra in the choir stall of the cathedral where his father's funeral is being held. The novel takes this fantasy seriously -- the praxis of rehearsing the memory of the Mambo Kings on I Love Lucy reruns creates an all-male community by faith.

If women in Mambo are contained through seduction or ignored as irrelevant, in *El Asalto*, they are expelled in a far more obvious and more violent way. First, the narrator strangles to death the woman who made a pass at him. More powerfully, the end of the novel thematizes Arenas's love/hate toward the mother that appears in each of the books of the *pentagonía*. As I have said, the narrator has been searching for his mother during the entire book in order to kill her. Along the way, he has successfully slaughtered so many counterrevolutionaries that he is to be presented with a special award during the great ceremony in honor of the Represiversary. As the dictator himself approaches the narrator to bestow the award, the narrator sees that the dictator is his mother. Enraged, his penis begins to swell until it is literally a weapon with which he knocks off layer upon layer of her armor: "Maniobrando detrás de sus monumentales nalgas, doy un salto, caigo de frente y la vuelvo a atacar. De un golpe mi pinga derriba su cuarto envoltorio. Y al fin puedo ver su cabeza, desprovista del casquete reprimero, su odiosa y cenicienta cabeza de vieja ladina, su gris pelambrera revuelta de chiva vieja flotando entre el sudor y la furia ... Y ahora la veo, está ahí, con sus millones de manchas y arrugas; la inmensa vaca encuera, con sus enormes nalgas y tetas descomunales, con su figura de sapo deforme, con su pelo cenizo y su hueco hediondo. El miembro erecto, con las manos en la cintura, me quedo de pie, mirándola. Mi odio y mi asco y mi escozor, son ahora inenominables" (139-40) / "I scramble behind her, and under the cover afforded me by the mounds of her enormous buttocks I leap over her, land before her, and continue my attack. With one blow, my member knocks off her fourth coat of armor. And at last I can see her head without its protective helmet -- that hated head of a cunning old hag, her ash-colored mat of hair like some stinking nanny goat's emitting a stench of sweat and fury. . . Her huge buttocks and breasts, her body like some monstrous toad's, her ash-gray hair and her stinking hole are exposed for all to see. With my member throbbingly erect, and my hands on my hips, I stand before her, looking at her. My hatred and my revulsion and my arousal are now beyond words to describe" (144).

The narrator's rage is finally brought to the boiling point when she calls him "hijo." As the dictator, she is someone who both as mother and as nation threatens to steal his masculinity and make him impotent. The narrator proceeds to murder his mother by raping her: "Mi erección se vuelve descomunal, y avanzo con mi falo proyectándose hacia su objetivo, hacia el hueco hediondo, y la clavo. Ella al ser traspasada emite un alarido prolongado y se derrumba al mismo tiempo que yo siento el triunfo, el goce furioso de desparramarme en su interior. Ella, soltando un aullido, estalla lanzando tornillos, arandelas, latas, gasolina, semen, mierda, y chorros de aceite" (140) / "My erection swells to enormous proportions, and I begin to step toward her, my phallus aimed dead for its mark, that fetid, stinking hole. And I thrust. As she is penetrated, she gives a long, horrible shriek, and then she collapses. I sense my triumph -- I come, and I feel the furious pleasure of discharging myself inside her. Howling, she explodes in a blast of bolts, washers, screws, pieces of shrapnellike tin, gasoline, smoke, semen, shit, and streams of motor oil" (145). As a result of this murder, Cuban citizens are finally liberated and the narrator lays down to rest. Some critics have argued that this scene is a parodic attack on misogyny and therefore no different from others scenes in the novel in which Arenas parodies violence or repression. Biron, for example, suggests that this scene critiques a cultural imperative for men to reject identification with women through violence, and exposes the poverty of a freedom that requires sexual attack (28). Yet, how can we be sure that this scene constitutes an *exposé*? It seems clear that scenes of violence against gays,

or repression of language and artistry are critical because in those instances there are no outcomes that we recognize as positive. In this case, however, it is through the rape/murder of his mother that the narrator, and indeed, the entire island, is liberated and at long last at peace. Further, in each of the novels of Arenas's autobiographical *pentagonía*, the mother is tyrannically omnipresent, oppressive, and judgmental of both Arenas's artistry and his sexuality.

Ávila reads this scene as the narrator's only way to escape the hell of absolute control exerted by the dictator: "By killing the phallic couple embodied in the mother as Reprimerísimo, Arenas enacts the fantasy of overcoming the source of his abjection, the possibility of killing the ambiguous objects of desire who simultaneously lure him into the house and cast him from it" (114). Certainly, the Reprimerísimo, as both Castro/father and mother, is oddly transgendered. And the novel may point to the pre-Oedipal more than the Oedipal moment, before gender is even constructed, in which the parent exercises complete power over the child. Still, during the climactic moment of release, to call the Reprimerísimo a couple is to ignore the narrative fact that the dictator is embodied as the narrator's mother and that she inspires a male narrator's anxiety of impotence. This masculine anxiety is in fact dispelled through fantasy, but it is a specifically sexist rape fantasy. What is more, the body matters a great deal in the content of these passages: the mother shrieks, she stinks, she's a hag, she's an animal, her body is full of the abject and the industrial. Ávila wants to read Arenas as radically liminal, comforting no one. But I would suggest that there are readers for whom the rape/murder of the mother is comforting. Arenas certainly challenges many oppressive structures with this text and others, but with this scene he joins a male revolutionary family that resorts to the most excessive forms of masculine violence in order to maintain the illusion of self-generation. Excess, repetition, self-birthing male families: both Hijuelos's and Arenas's texts leave us with a version of masculinity that, despite its vigorous protestations to the contrary, fail to reproduce anything. We are left not with too much, but too little. Excess gives way, finally, to lack. Eugenio is stranded by the absence of father, uncle, and icon. Arenas's narrator, in staging an invasion of the site of his own origination, sullies his very source and invites his own death. These texts of masculine anxiety throw us up against a Cuba that is constituted by a series of gaps more than a location.

Charles Bernheimer describes, in his article "The Anxieties of Comparison," the anxieties felt by practitioners of comparative literature in "an age of multiculturalism" -- over object of study, method, expertise, authenticity with respect to identity politics, and over the potential loss of our elite status among literary critics. The anxieties of impotence that I have placed under study here give rise to my own professional anxieties of comparison. I have said that for comparative literature really to reflect the current circumstances of globalization, we need to consider challenging the nation or ethnic group as the definitive categories from which we draw comparisons. In this way, we may open up the field of comparative literature to Latin American literature in ways that productively engage cultural groups defined in other ways -- moment of migration, reason for migration, political affiliation, class status, sexuality. And yet, have I really successfully done without the nation or ethnic group here? Has Cuba really become more an absence than a presence, a split state? At precisely the moment in which I am trying to account for globalization and the way it is making categories such as "national" obsolete, my efforts resituate a characteristically Cuban (even Latin) logic of masculine excess.

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Author's Profile: Christina Marie Tourino teaches English, US ethnic minority writing, Latin American literatures, and feminist theory at St. John's University in Minnesota. With a recent Ph.D. from Duke University (2000), Tourino's dissertation -- *Sex and Reproduction in Contemporary Ethnic Literature* -- is about contemporary ethnic texts of the United States. In her work, Tourino analyses US ethnic texts comparatively, based on the premise that such texts are about the problematics of ethnic reproduction in a hostile environment. Tourino has a paper forthcoming on Kogawa's *Obasan* in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (2002) and she is at work on a project about Latin and Mediterranean masculinity. E-mail: <[ctourino@csbsju.edu](mailto:ctourino@csbsju.edu)>.