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Smoke and Mirrors: Generic Manipulation and Doubling in *Dancing to "Almendra"*

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“Maybe she’d been creating a smoke screen with the story of Rodney only to hide the details of this other story, a much harsher and more complicated story, from me,” protagonist Joaquin Porrata muses in Mayra Montero’s *Dancing to “Almendra”* (132). Montero’s novel is alternately structured by Joaquin’s investigation of Umberto Anastasia’s murder in New York (and its connection to Havana’s gangsters and underground crime network) and his lover Yolanda’s italicized storytelling, which traces her family’s history and presents an additional mystery in the form of family ties. Set in 1957, the novel’s Cuba is on the brink of revolution and Castro’s rise to power. The uncertainty of the political landscape is underscored by the novel’s series of mysteries, beginning with how the death of a hippopotamus at the local zoo is tied to Anastasia’s murder in New York. The motifs of smoke and mirrors recur throughout *Dancing to “Almendra”* as Joaquin confronts several mysterious connections—New York to Havana, Yolanda and Rodney to Trafficante, his brother Santiago to the imminent revolution. The phrase “smoke and mirrors” suggests deception and dissimulation while at the same time reaffirming the existence of underlying truth that is obfuscated in the act (“Smoke and Mirrors”). Colloquially, the phrase is often mobilized in political contexts, but its roots are located in magical illusions, wherein objects are made to appear and disappear by the mirror’s reflection and the smoke’s distraction. “Smoke and mirrors” is thus an apt prism through which to understand *Dancing to “Almendra,”* which investigates the nature of illusion and reality while sustaining a political investment in social commentary and critique.

Throughout Joaquin’s investigation and Yolanda’s storytelling, the “truth” refracted and clouded by the narrative’s smoke and mirrors is never fully revealed. Even at moments where Joaquin receives ostensibly reliable information, such as his conversation with fellow journalist McCrary, he is encircled by “an extraordinary cloud of smoke that seemed to surround only us and not drift anywhere else” (100). The effect, metaphorically and literally, is to circumscribe Joaquin’s vision and preclude a desired objective view of the facts and their connection to one another. The fact that an objective perspective and narrative closure are refused in *Dancing to “Almendra”* suggests that the novel shares both postmodern aesthetics and politics; the novel is ultimately more focused on how the illusion—the smoke and mirrors of Cuban politics and crime—works rather than revealing the underlying “truth” of the act. And yet, the themes of mirroring and doubling in the novel suggest more than mere postmodern play or parody. Montero’s novel manipulates the conventions of detective stories and hard-boiled crime fiction in a way that seems to classify the novel within the postmodern or metaphysical detective novel genre. *Dancing to “Almendra”* also plays with doubling, parodying, and mirroring thematically through the character pairings of Porrata’s father and brother and George Raft and Juan Bulgado.

In this article, I first consider the novel's indebtedness to various genres—classic detective fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction, and film noir—even as it revises them by exploiting their characteristics in a postcolonial and specifically Cuban setting. I consider the novel's parody of classic detective fiction in the context of its critique of American hegemony, which is a political statement that runs from the novel's generic form to its "real" and cinematic characters implanted into the text. The doubling of real and fictive characters is continued throughout the novel through character pairings of Bulgado and George Raft as well as Joaquin's father and brother Santiago. Despite the reflections, doubled performances, and smoke and mirrors that structure the narrative, I argue that the novel's political, revolutionary context rises to the surface through the shocking appearance of Yolanda's and Santiago's mutilated bodies. Despite its postmodern aesthetics and parody of the possibilities of investigative detective work in relation to truth and justice, I conclude that the novel is nevertheless a socially committed, political text deeply interested in the realities of revolutionary violence and social critique.

"I MIXED TWO STORIES": POSTMODERN DETECTION AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

It is important to indicate the ways in which *Dancing to "Almendra"* bridges classic and postmodern detective fiction so that its political investment and critiques are not missed among the play of film and fiction. Rather than distracting from its political message that targets American cultural hegemony and the crime that connects the North and South, this section argues that the novel's employment of film noir characters and parody of the detective plot serves the novel's critique by drawing attention to the misperceptions, absurdity, and violence that result from interpreting reality through imported, simulated forms. In this way, despite its play with popular references and refusal to disclose the "truth" behind the various mysteries and investigations in the novel, *Dancing to "Almendra"* belongs to the tradition of detective fiction in Cuba that is faithful to depicting and indicting—if not remedying and solving—social ills implicated in globalization and American economic and cultural imperialism.

Dancing to "Almendra" opens with Joaquin Porrata boldly stating that he can "explain the connection" between Umberto Anastasia's murder in New York and the escape and subsequent death of a hippopotamus in Havana (3). "No one else, only me, and the individual who looked after the lions" can reveal the connection, Joaquin boasts, and yet the clarity of connection is constantly frustrated by the complex web of organized crime and the questionable reliability of Porrata's primary source: Juan Bulgado. Montero's novel plays with the detective genre's formulaic structure by blocking the reliability of clues and separating the solution of the investigation from the establishment of justice.

According to Persephone Braham, who studies detective literature in Cuba and Mexico, the traditional detective story follows the stable formula of “crime +clues +deduction =solution” (86). *Dancing to “Almendra”* opens with a crime, Umberto Anastasia’s murder, and Porrata’s investigation yields clues that begin to tie mob activity in the United States to the proliferation of hotels and casinos in Havana. Joaquin’s deduction, however, is not the unimpeachable ratiocination of Sherlock Holmes; instead, we follow the amateur and inexperienced Joaquin as he is ordered to New York by his newspaper, clues are volunteered by strangers, and tips are literally placed in his pocket. In terms of narrative structure, *Dancing to “Almendra”* predictably utilizes the temporal displacement common to detective fiction, which literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov describes as the genre refusing to narrate the moment of the crime and instead revealing the crime gradually through its consequences (Pyrhonen 49). This narrative structure produces two narrative strands, the story of the crime and of the investigation itself, and the classic detective story, bringing both together in complete narrative closure.

On a very basic level, *Dancing to “Almendra”* is a kind of classic crime fiction, though following Charles Rzepka’s introduction to *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, we ought to consider what we might mean by and characterize as crime and fiction (1). Although Rzepka is concerned with crime fiction generally, the subgenre of Cuban detective fiction implicates crime and corruption on a scale larger than an individual instance of law-breaking. Persephone Braham’s *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico* surveys the form and the function of detective fiction in Latin American literature. She argues that by using “simulation or parody, authors engag[e] the marginal status and formulaic nature of detective narrative to dramatize Latin America’s peripheral position with respect to Western culture” and that these texts are “concern[ed] with foreign paradigms of modernity, and ultimately the failure of liberalism and its constituent elements in a Hispanic context” (ix). Further, Helen Oakley observes in *From Revolution to Migration: A Study of Contemporary Cuban and Cuban-American Crime Fiction* that the crime fiction genre’s “development...within Latin America itself cannot...readily be understood without considering the relationship between Latin America and both European and US literary, cultural traditions” (1). While together Oakley and Braham suggest that Caribbean crime fiction’s relationship to Western cultural production is a useful entry point to discussions of the genre’s political commentary, the genre is shaped by and modified for new contexts. The editors of *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* argue that authors from around the world have adapted detective story conventions to specific, local contexts, yielding a “kind of dynamic interplay between the modern and the postmodern, the material and the metaphysical, the investigation of truth and of investigation itself” (Pearson and Singer 12). Even if the detective novel appears to follow the formula of

detective fiction generally, then, the specific local setting for the imported form can work to indict larger structural inequalities, making the entire Western hemisphere its target of critique.

Although *Dancing to "Almendra"* is not one of the novels that either Braham or Pearson and Singer consider; Montero's novel enters into conversation with a long history of detective fiction in Latin America, presenting continuities with the subgenre's political investments and discontinuities with the classic detective fiction's aesthetics. Braham observes that "Cuban and Mexican detective narrative concerns the failure of revolutionary projects," and *Dancing to "Almendra"* indeed foregrounds this characteristic through its 1957 setting, during a time of guerilla warfare in Cuba that was a prelude to Castro's revolution in 1959 (xii). Interestingly, just as the moment of the crime in classic detective fiction is not a narrated moment, neither is the Cuban revolution in Joaquin's narrative; instead, the novel jumps from Lansky's prediction in the final chapter that "'All of it is collapsing...it's all ruined'" to the epilogue, "Early in the morning of January 1, 1959, everything changed, just as Lansky predicted" (256, 259). The revolution, according to Stephen Wilkinson, additionally altered the orientation of Cuban detective fiction. Whereas "[p]rerevolutionary Cuban detective fiction...was commercialized and oriented towards the market," post-revolutionary fiction attempted to distance itself from the United States and specifically the "island's neocolonial past" (107). By omitting the Cuban revolution through narrative prolepsis, Montero's novel makes explicit the continuities in pre- and post-revolutionary Cuba that the revolutionary leaders sought to disavow.

Part of the novel's political investment, then, can be identified in what Montero refuses to recreate as part of the investigation—the event of the Cuban revolution, the details of Santiago's revolutionary activity, and the moment of his death. These significant narrative moments are what Robyn Warhol calls unnarrated passages, which "explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator's refusal to narrate" (221). Her concept of the "subnarratable" is most applicable here; the subnarratable is "not marked by either disnarration or unnarration...its presence is typically marked by its absence" (223). While the violent consequences of these moments are represented in Santiago's mutilated body and described graphically in the text, the novel refuses to recreate the initial violence as part of Joaquin's investigation. Unlike other instances of detective fiction, where the narrative's energy is directed toward eventually revealing all, *Dancing to "Almendra"* is selective in the way it chooses to narrate—or not—pivotal plot points. This refusal to reconstruct pauses the cycle of violence, allowing Montero's narrative to focus on the fallout and effects of violence as Joaquin's family escapes and scatters around the United States.

The production of detective fiction in Latin America in the twentieth century serves as one precedent for the thematic preoccupations and structure of

Dancing to "Almendra," but the novel is also indebted to the genre of noir detective fiction. In her introduction to a collection of Cuban short stories, Achy Obejas observes, "The noir, it seems, may be particularly apt for Havana: Descriptive rather than prescriptive, noirs explore the symptoms of an ailing society but rarely suggest remedies....Their protagonists are alienated and at risk....Noirs explore and expose but refuse to solve" (16). The Havana of history and of *Dancing to "Almendra"* is decadent, crime-ridden, and inexorably headed toward revolution. But neither the revolution nor the novel concludes with Havana's criminals brought to justice or the streets swept clean of crime. Joaquin is transferred to Police News and continues to receive tips from Juan Bulgado, but his "investigations" seem to stay at the level of description; he writes about Boris's murder in the doorway of his own restaurant, but the only witness is a five-year-old girl Joaquin is banned from interviewing. While both Joaquin and the novel draw attention to the ubiquity of crime in Havana (as well as crime's imbrication in national politics and transnational crime networks), justice and the full disclosure of guilty parties is continually deferred. Like other noirs, *Dancing to "Almendra"* is rife with descriptions of societal ills but no remedy is suggested and no solution is given.

The novel's indebtedness to noir is further substantiated by its continual references to film noir, popular during the time period in which *Dancing to "Almendra"* is set. Films in the noir genre were produced between 1940 and 1959, and marked by their "dark, cynical tone that was prevalent in a growing number of American motion pictures" (Hannsberry 2). Two consequences for Montero's novel are worth noting here. First, film noir, in this definition, is a particularly American genre that denotes a cynicism that in *Dancing to "Almendra,"* is exported to Cuba. Second, the end date of the film noir era is 1959, which coincides with Batista's exile in Portugal and the culmination of the Cuban revolution. Montero's novel shares film noir's dark cynicism despite being set at a time of political revolution. As a work of detective fiction, the cynicism suggests a pessimistic view both of the pursuit of crime and truth that forms its primary narrative, and of the promises of revolution.

The connections between *Dancing to "Almendra"* and film noir are further strengthened by the appearance of several well-known film noir actors within the text, creating a layer of intertextual doubling. Most obviously, the actor George Raft is a connection between real life gangsters and underground crime in Havana, film noir, and Montero's novel. Raft's first mention in the novel occurs when Joaquin and Julián are exploring the hotel and are told that the American visitors meeting secretly are "'Gangsters, like in the movies'" (16). Film representations of gangsters are a shared reference point for understanding the real-life gangsters Joaquin encounters. Although Joaquin and his family do not often go to the movies, the most recent film he had seen prior to this encounter was a George Raft movie. Later, when Joaquin and Julián are reading about Luciano's arrest, Joaquin

criticizes Luciano because he “let himself be caught and didn’t even put down the dog to shoot it out with the police, which was what gangsters did. What we saw George Raft do: shoot till he had no damn bullets left so he could get away to St. Louis” (21). The use of film plots to prime expectations for action and events continues throughout the novel, most notably in Juan Bulgado’s identification with George Raft. What Joaquin points to in this passage is the way in which the mirror of film can cause disappointment when real actors fail to “perform” as expected.

Montero’s use of George Raft as a character underscores the complicated relationship of film to reality within the novel; rather than film simply mirroring real life, reality in Havana reflects film in a parody that is equal parts noir and postmodern play. In her collection of short biographies of film noir stars, Karen Hannsberry writes that George Raft “led a life that often closely mirrored his celluloid persona. ‘George was like his screen image,’ actress Joan Bennet once said” (539). Raft starred in the 1932 movie *Scarface*, which was loosely based on the real-life gangster Al Capone. Al Capone later met with Raft and gave his performance his approval. Hannsberry summarizes, “Throughout the next several decades, Raft’s film persona and his life off screen would intertwine in a similar manner, as he continued to associate with shady underworld figures, including high-profile gangster Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Siegel” (541). References to George Raft abound in *Dancing to “Almendra,”* drawing attention to a figure whose life already conflates distinctions between reality and filmic representation.

When attempting to classify the novel’s generic properties, the mobilization of film noir plots, characters, and references straddle the divide between classic hard-boiled detective fiction and postmodern or metaphysical detective fiction. In the first place, film noir borrowed from the hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s and 40s (Irwin xii); references to film noir, then, already contain references to this genre as well. Hard-boiled fiction is typified by “a dystopian view of the modern city in which chaos, alienation, and discord prevail” (Braham xiii). According to Andrew Pepper, this fiction emphasizes the investigation of the crime more than the actual perpetration (142). Hard-boiled fiction flourished after World War II and its detective protagonist confronted crime as it permeated the everyday; its pessimism derived from the fact that violence and crime is the rule rather than the exception. Montero’s Joaquin slowly realizes the prevalence of crime at all levels of Havana society as those closest to him—Julián and his mother Aurora, Juan Bulgado, and his brother Santiago—are implicated in organized crime and revolutionary violence. The novel too ends on a pessimistic note; the beauty of the “Almendra” *danzón* that Joaquin associates with his youth and Aurora is never recaptured by its composer, whose “last attempt to displace ‘Almendra’ was a total disaster, an insipid *danzón* that he named after the almond drink: ‘Horchata’” (261).

The same film references that underscore the pessimism both of noir and of a Havana on the verge of revolution are also popular references that, as part of the

novel's postmodern aesthetic, play with the ideas of performance, reality, and authenticity. In general, postmodern literary devices "include parody, pastiche, reference to popular culture, intertextuality, and a treatment of subjectivity as both desirable and suspect, depending on the position of the subject with respect to the modern episteme" (Braham 14). Although a notoriously slippery term on which no consensus exists, in the specific Latin American context, postmodern theory "is unified by its social agenda and concerns over globalization and neoliberalism. . . . postmodernism in the Latin American detective novel describes a critical stance toward a mythologizing ideological authority that corresponds to and supports a modernist aesthetic" (15). The kind of parody that a postmodern Latin American detective novel would indulge in is not endlessly playful, but rather parody with a political purpose. The postmodern detective story is often interchangeably referenced as the metaphysical detective story, though a distinction can be made between the two in terms of the purpose of their parody. The "metaphysical" detective story "must necessarily employ the conventions of the 'classic' detective story, if only to question, subvert, and parody them, notably in the matter of the solution" (Merivale 308). The self-referentiality of the postmodern detective story, which draws attention to the formulaic structure and character types, is mobilized in the metaphysical detective story to comment on the "'mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot'" (308).

Dancing to "Almendra," through references to film that destabilize the nature of reality as well as the ability to differentiate expectations primed by cinema's simulacra from embodied performances in "real" life, targets Havana's society and the effect that American globalization has had on understanding the world through its given "scripts." Jon Thompson's reading of the postmodern espionage novel is helpful in understanding the postmodern detective novel as rendered by Mayra Montero, as both share a postmodern interest in the relationship between the "real" and its reproductions. The postmodern espionage novel's narrative complexity "stems from the difficulties the protagonist encounters in attempting to distinguish an event from the simulations of that event, typically by intelligence agencies with a vested interest in concealing or transforming particular historical facts" (Thompson 158). This play between simulation and reality derives from Baudrillard's hyperreal, "in which the boundaries between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary, and the present and the past combine and recombine in a dance of signs" (151). But Thompson argues that the postmodern espionage novel, for all of its ostensibly postmodern play, does not wholly reduce the "real" to empty simulacra. The postmodern espionage novel, and by extension the postmodern detective novel, "reworks many of the conventions of detective fiction—conventions of investigation, pursuit, scrutiny, analysis, and final inference—in order to evaluate the values, norms, and socioeconomic

arrangements that produce postmodernity” (175). Thompson’s reading argues that postmodern espionage novels expose Western hegemony in the (re)production of reality and its referents. But through the parody of American film stars and scripts in a Cuban context, Montero’s novel suggests that postmodern detective fiction can also further expose cultural hegemony by shifting the focus to the North-South axis *within* the Western hemisphere.

The play of parody and intertextuality most closely situates the novel within the postmodern, metaphysical detective fiction subgenre, but because of Latin American detective fiction’s investment in critiques of modernity, the distinction between the postmodern aesthetics and depiction of modernity associated with “classic” detective stories should not be overstated. What we see in Montero’s novel is not so much a break with classic detective fiction conventions through parody, but rather an exploitation of its conventions that demonstrate the critiques of modernity and American hegemony already contained within the generic form. If we trace the evolution of detective fiction through its precursor crime fiction back to the Newgate novels that were popular in the early nineteenth century, then detective fiction has *always* had a complicated relationship between real-life crime and its fictional renderings. Newgate novels were based on famous criminals from the eighteenth-century, and *Dancing to “Almendra”* follows this tradition in its portrayal of Umberto Anastasia’s murder and the real-life gangsters—Lucky Luciano, Meyer Lansky, Santo Trafficante, among others—that pepper the novel. The crime and detective fiction genres share “inherent tendencies toward self-parody, reflexive humor, and limit-case comedy” that make their “postmodern” appropriation, in many ways, a continuation or exaggeration of its defining features (Rzepka and Horsley 573). “Because detective literature is a distinctly modern genre,” Persephone Braham writes, “it can serve as a fulcrum for exposing the fissures and divergences that characterize the performance of modernity in two very different settings: post-1968 Mexico, and Cuba in the heyday, then decline, of its modern Revolution” (x). Despite its postmodern play and parody, then, Montero’s novel shares with classic detective literature an investment in exploring the fractures of modernity that mark it less an abrupt departure from modern detective fiction, and more a continuation of its ideological investments.

SEEING DOUBLE: PERFORMING “GEORGE RAFT”

Just as Raft in real life seemed to mirror his “reel life,” the Raft who appears in *Dancing to “Almendra”* in fictionalized form shares many characteristics with his real-life double. Raft’s connections to gambling and organized crime are well-documented; early in his film career, he worked with notorious gangster Owney Madden, a friend from his childhood (Hannsberry 540). Both Raft and gangster

Meyer Lansky were shareholders in the London casino Colony Club (547). Raft is further connected to Lansky through their mutual friend, bootlegger Bugsy Siegel (Estrada 211). Raft's relationship with Santo Trafficante is well-documented through Raft's employment as The Capri's "official greeter" in Havana—an event that *Dancing to "Almendra"* includes in its plot (Dietche 66). The roles that Raft played on-screen mirrored his associations in real life, and this slippage contributed to Raft's screen persona. Summarizing the relationship between fiction and film noir, John Irwin observes, "The screen persona of any movie star is constituted both from a composite of his or her most successful film roles (those roles most appealing to the audience and those the actor seems to have inhabited most fully) and from elements in the actor's own physical, psychological, and emotional personality" (214). The combination of "fictive character" and "actor's self" works to convince the audience that the actor fully inhabits a particular role. Raft's connections to mob and crime circles link and collapse his roles in fiction, film, and real life, and it is this inherent slippage that Montero exploits in her character pairing of George Raft and Juan Bulgado.

Juan Bulgado resurfaces often in the text as a flawed informant, borrowing scripts and character names from George Raft films to direct Joaquin's investigation into Havana's crime network. Bulgado is introduced at the very beginning of the novel as the only other person who can explain the connection between Anastasia's murder in New York and an escaped hippopotamus from the Havana zoo. From the beginning of Joaquin's investigation, Bulgado's Raft obsession marks him as odd and indicates "a piece...missing in his skull;" Bulgado "knew George Raft's pictures by heart, and when he was young he'd learned the actor's most solemn statements, he'd learned them in English, though Bulgado didn't speak the language" (32). Bulgado's attempts to mirror Raft are limited to what he knows of Raft through the latter's film performances, which are already a distorted mirror of Raft's real-life associations with organized crime. But here, Bulgado's mirroring is rendered additionally absurd by the language he speaks; regardless of how accurate his parroting of Raft's lines is, their meaning is inaccessible to him because he does not speak English. This character trait reinforces the novel's critique of US cultural hegemony described above, where the importation of forms—genres, and in this latter case, language—is rendered absurd by their relocation.

Bulgado's attempts to mirror Raft by inhabiting his film roles have additional import for Joaquin's investigation. Bulgado changes his name or alias depending on which Raft film that he judges the circumstances call for, variably Johnny Lamb, Johnny Angel, or Nick Cain. Because the novel follows the conventions of detective fiction in terms of temporal displacement, Joaquin can reflect early on in the narrative, "If I'd known then that all those names corresponded to characters played by George Raft, I'd have felt calmer. But I didn't

know or suspect anything. A madman with information is a hand grenade..." (36). What is unclear in Bulgado's "mad" identification with George Raft is whether Bulgado intentionally lived his life in order to mirror Raft's films, or whether he made sense of his life by retroactively mapping it onto the plots of the films. For example, Bulgado explains that the source of the alleged Trafficante note is his lover, a hotel housekeeper whose husband is in jail. "The same thing happened to me that happened to George Raft," Bulgado explains. "Didn't you see that movie where he works as a bail bondsman and falls in love with a woman whose husband's in jail?" It might be the case that Bulgado sought out this lover in order to mirror Raft's character Vince, but it might also be the case that Bulgado understands his intimacy with the housekeeper only because of the Raft script. The parallels with Raft movies have an obscuring effect for Joaquin, whose unfamiliarity with many of the movies hinders him from anticipating the directions his investigation (shaped by Bulgado's tips) will take. This question of primacy has the effect of blurring the lines between fact and fiction during Joaquin's investigation and the connections he is attempting to make; is it coincidence that elements parallel Raft's films, or is Bulgado intentionally skewing evidence and information in order to mirror the movies?

The novel continually frustrates attempts to disentangle the relationship between the movie plots and the investigation, and the scene where Bulgado and Raft come face-to-face yields further conflation rather than clarity. Bulgado has been feeding Joaquin tips in exchange for arranging a meeting with Raft at the opening of the Capri Casino. As Raft makes his speech, he announces that he would make being the greeter at the casino his "best role," and proceeds to flip a coin in his hand, "the old low-class trick that had characterized him years before and now excited the people there" (175). With a simple flick of a coin, this fictional Raft draws attention to *another* role, his performance as "Guino Rinaldo" in the 1932 film *Scarface*. Raft later parodied this role when he played "Spats Colombo" in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), which featured another coin-flipping gangster. The film *Some Like It Hot* will soon be released, according to the novel's chronology, and so Raft's coin-flipping performance at the casino is bookended by the "original" performance in *Scarface* and the parody of the performance in *Some Like It Hot*. Raft reveals Spats Colombo as the name of his latest character to Joaquin, who is to pass it on to Bulgado. The layers and repetitions of performance, both on film and in "real" life, give the narrative of *Dancing to "Almendra"* a feeling of inevitable and endless reproduction in which the question of original or authentic performance is rendered unresolvable.

Instead of resolving once and for the "real" and the "copy," the meeting of Bulgado and Raft suggests that drawing a distinction is not possible. Joaquin notes that when Raft sees Bulgado for the first time, Raft seems to "look at him as if he were looking at himself" (176). The mirroring between the pair continues by

mirroring a movie; Bulgado delivers lines in English to which Raft responds, which Joaquin says “looked rehearsed.” But the mirroring effect is not a faithful reproduction in a strict sense, but rather mimicry with a difference. In that moment, “it seemed that Raft had found a twin brother, a guy who didn’t look anything like him but who did look like him, identical in another dimension, another accidental level we all could see” (177). Even as Joaquin describes the meeting as “the height of absurdity,” the novel ascribes meaning and import to the moment rather than dismisses it. Coming face to face with Raft does not render Bulgado’s various “Raft” performances any less real; rather, this exchange, as part of a series of endless performances, opens up the possibility of connection between the characters as they share the same role.

There are ways, then, in which Joaquin’s role in the detective story is already circumscribed by the performances of other characters. As the novel continues, Joaquin finds himself reminded more and more of various films. The last article that Joaquin writes for *Prensa Libre* begins, “As if it were a scene taken from one of George Raft’s gangster pictures, shortly after leaving the Hotel Capri, this reporter discovered that someone had slipped an anonymous message into his jacket pocket” (241). The article prompts his co-worker Castillo to divulge that Voloshen, who according to the note will be murdered soon, woke up one morning to the severed heads of his wife’s St. Bernards in his bed. Joaquin stammers, “I saw that in a movie,” and Castillo responds, “No you didn’t.... What movie could you have seen it in? Nobody knows about it” (242). In some ways, this metafictional reference to *The Godfather* is typical of postmodern fiction; the film, released in 1972, could not have been a reference for Joaquin Porrata in 1957. The reference to *The Godfather* is more than a metafictional joke, however, as it plays with the connection between fiction and film, and reality and truth. Although allegedly a mixture of mobster models, Puzo’s *The Godfather* has striking similarities to real-life mob boss Carlo Gambino, who was Anastasia’s underboss (Bruno). Speculation abounds about the relationship between the book and film and alleged real-life models, and Montero’s temporally disruptive reference to *The Godfather* plays with the possibility of art mirroring life, and life mirroring art in turn.

“FAITHFUL REFLECTION”: THE SHATTERED MIRROR OF SANTIAGO PORRATA

Despite the parodic play of film and reality that Bulgado and Raft represent, the novel’s mirrors are not simply endlessly and self-referentially reflective. Bulgado and Raft’s mirroring is an example of tautological reflection; the endless parody and performance suggest a reading of mirrors in the novel as *mise en abime*, or infinite reflections of reflections. Although often inaccessible to Joaquin, the “real”

does, at violent moments in the text, impinge on the performance and temporarily shatter the mirrors, gesturing at truth even if not fully disclosing it. Quoting the work of postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson, Persephone Braham writes,

“The proliferation of mirrors is all the more terrifying because each new image brings us closer to the face.” According to this scheme, devices such as parody are duplicative or mimetic reactions provoked by an oppressive authority and therefore ethically legitimate strategies of resistance or truth seeking. (10)

This suggests that mirroring is not relegated to endless self-referentiality, but rather can be a method to gesture toward truth and revolutionary resistance. The mirroring of Santiago and his father is a more explicit rendering of this possibility; Joaquin’s brother Santiago is a mirror of his father, but Santiago’s involvement in revolutionary politics and violence shatters the illusion and reveals the danger of “doubling” in Havana.

This danger is demonstrated, on a smaller scale, within the Porrata family, specifically in the relationship between father and son. Joaquin’s dysfunctional family includes a sister who struggles with gender identity and a brother who is a “faithful reflection” of his father (31). While the mirror clearly does not reflect the truth of his sister’s gender identity, Joaquin’s brother is described as a reflected image of his father. But, as Joaquin notes in retrospect, “I looked back, looked back at the years of my life...I embraced it all, and what I had left was smoke” (31). The presence of smoke undermines the ability of mirrors to faithfully reflect and emphasizes the emptiness that is left if what is “real” is left at the level of reflection. Joaquin’s father jeopardizes his sense of self by his complete identification with his son. Whereas Bulgado’s sense of self remains intact through the recognition that his identification with Raft exists at the level of parodic performance, Joaquin’s father “depended totally on the opinion of his son. I don’t believe he ever trusted anyone else the way he trusted Santiago. My father told him about his life; they were identical, they were accomplices, and they had a good time together” (37). Joaquin’s father in *Dancing to “Almendra”* confuses the reflection with the real, believing that the “faithful reflection” mirrors accurately. Santiago’s death following a raid on revolutionary forces shatters the mirror, pointing to the danger of mistaking the smoke and mirrors of illusion for a mirror-image.

The abrupt reality of Santiago’s death causes Joaquin’s father to reevaluate his sense of self. Joaquin enters the morgue and sees his father “in the attitude of somebody leaning over a puddle of water and staring at his own reflection” and struggling with the realization that “Santiago was not what he seemed and never would be, not to him, who was his intimate friend...” (185). Joaquin later worries,

I was afraid my father wouldn't take refuge in anything or anybody, except maybe in the memory of the deceased, *in running the same movie over and over again*: what my brother said or didn't say, the comment he never let slip, a strange package, a call at an odd time. Much later I came to the conclusion that Papá blamed himself for not having guessed what no one could ever have guessed. (193, emphasis mine)

The tragedy and trauma of mistaking Santiago for his mirror image ultimately results in Joaquin's father committing suicide in 1961. In the epilogue, Joaquin does not speculate about his father's motivations, but after Santiago's death his father gradually disappears both from his home and from the narrative.

Both in the novel's narrative and from the father's perspective, then, the illusion of the mirror-image breaks down when confronted with the reality of Santiago's mutilated body. Joaquin's father has already seen and identified the body when Joaquin views the corpse himself:

I saw Santiago's face, his light brown hair gleaming as if he'd just come out of water, and his sunken eyelids, there was nothing under those eyelids, only a few bloodstains...These eyes of mine felt an awful solitude because those other eyes, the living or dead eyes of Santiago, were missing...his torso was naked, splotted with bruises and burns... (186).

Because of these marks, which the state inflicts through mechanism of the Military Intelligence Service (SIM), the reality of Santiago's work for revolutionary forces is undeniable. These marks also undermine the "truth" of the state's official version of events. Papá is told by Colonel Ventura that Santiago was killed during the shootout, but "Papá knew it wasn't true, knew Santiago had been taken to the dungeons of the SIM alive, probably wounded, but alive" (209). Significantly, the missing eyes—necessary to see one's reflection in the mirror as well as to return another's gaze—belie the state's story by suggesting torture and mutilation that could not possibly result from bullets alone.

The play between mirror-images similarly breaks down in Yolanda's narrative as her mutilated body dispels the illusion of the magical act and, significantly, her asymmetrical body literally refuses the imperative to double. Yolanda's story directly involves the smoke and mirrors of magical performance, but her missing arm stresses the danger of knowingly sacrificing the real for the performance. Joaquin and his father mistake Santiago's reflection for a faithful reproduction of his father, but Yolanda knows that the "magic" of cutting her in half is an illusion or act. Still, when her heel is caught and her arm is stuck in the

path of the knife, she encourages the magician “*to go on, I didn’t want the kids to see me gushing blood, I didn’t want to ruin the number*” (57). When the doors of the box are opened, the audience sees a puddle of blood on the floor, but mistakes it for part of the act. The mutilated arm, which becomes infected and needs to be amputated, is a violent reminder of the real, material body that exists despite the performance. Yolanda and Santiago’s mutilated bodies are sobering moments where the postmodern play of performance, smoke, and mirrors shatters. Yolanda and Santiago’s performances are important counterpoints to the playful mirrors of George Raft and Juan Bulgado. Importantly, Santiago’s mutilated body introduces the revolutionary context that is the novel’s setting, and allows the political stakes to erupt into Joaquin’s investigative narrative. When Joaquin contrasts his investigation with Santiago’s revolutionary activity, he concludes, “Compared with that, with what he’d done, my work had been an absurd exercise...” (189). Eventually, Joaquin’s investigation leads him to Meyer Lansky, from whom he gains insight into contemporary Cuban politics and Batista’s inevitable exile. Rather than bringing the criminals involved in Anastasia’s murder to justice or writing the definitive article linking Anastasia’s murder to the escaped hippopotamus, Joaquin understands the surprising connections between those closest to him and Cuba’s political future. Instead of proving the existence of links that nobody else knows, *Dancing to “Almendra”* inverts the expectations of the detective genre by revealing what everyone else knows but no one can prove.

DOUBLE LIVES: HAVANA AND PARTIAL TRUTHS

The smoke and mirrors in *Dancing to “Almendra”* are sometimes mechanisms to disguise, like the guise of casinos to mask criminal activity, but at other times serve to refract violent truths in an effort to protect characters from trauma. The postmodern aesthetics in the novel are thus not employed in a celebration of playful performance, but rather in a commitment to truths and realities too painful to divulge in full. Yolanda’s narrative, which features a leprous Rodney who is literally falling apart in addition to her own bodily mutilation, is told gradually and in fragments. Joaquin’s investigation involves several flashbacks to memories and employs temporal displacement not just as a gesture toward the conventions of detective fiction, but also to contain moments of violence through gradual disclosure. In the chapter significantly titled “The Mirror,” Joaquin opens with Madrazo shouting, “They shut down our presses!” before recounting the horror of being forced, as a deterrent to further investigative work, to dismember dead bodies with Bulgado (142). The chapter closes by returning to its beginning: “Madrazo looked up out of the corner of his eye; that was enough for him to know who I was, and that was when he shouted: ‘They shut down our presses!’” (153). But the

narrative that is temporally displaced is not fully disclosed to Madrazo, though the reader, Joaquin, and Bulgado share the horror of the reality at the zoo. Joaquin reflects on his storytelling, “He and I both knew we were close to the outcome, but only I—and Bulgado—would know the truth; there are things that can’t be told even when they occur against our will, they’re too monstrous, too humiliating” (146). The focus on fragmentation and partial truths within the novel, then, reveals a commitment to reality and truth rather than a relinquishment of it in favor of postmodern skepticism.

What we see in the mirrors in *Dancing to “Almendra”* is truth at an angle, distorted in an effort to see even more clearly. As Joaquin remarks at the end of “The Mirror” chapter, “I’d been with the dead, I’d smelled blood, human and animal blood mixed, the contact that obscures everything, or that clarifies everything, depending on how you look at it: a mirror is deciphered only in another mirror” (152-3). The novel plays with doubles and mirrors not in an effort to obscure the truth that Joaquin is after, but rather in order to see even more plainly. The real world, Joaquin concludes, is “hidden boiling under my feet...the real world that was the basis for the clamor of the city and the agreeable life of all my friends” (163). The novel preserves that doubleness of the city in its depiction of Havana’s organized crime, as its ostensible “clean territory” is indebted to the dirty work of Bulgado and others to dispose of literal dead bodies (151).

Modern Havana, on the brink of revolution, is subject to the same doubling that Santiago asserts characterizes everyone’s lives; Joaquin remembers,

My brother, Santiago, would say that everybody, even cloistered nuns, led a double life. And that night I began to think that the country had one too, and that the city had an imaginary face, more or less its everyday face...and another hidden face, the face of landings, secret transmissions, homemade bombs, and disfigured corpses on the sidewalks. (126)

Paradoxically, the smoke and mirrors typically meant to obscure and dissemble help Joaquin and the reader see the hidden face of Havana more clearly. The mirrored pairings of Bulgado and Raft and Santiago and Papá work as microcosmic mirrors of Havana itself—doubled but not identical, and mired in hidden but real violence respectively. Jon Thompson concludes that when novelists—those from non-Western, or marginalized countries, or those within but critical of the developed world—“exploit the critical possibilities of crime fiction,” the form can be mobilized “to critically examine the failures and corruption of political life” (176). The difficulty that Joaquin has in tracing the connections of organized crime from Havana to New York and the horrific violence that lies at the center of his

investigation is emblematic of this critical examination, even if the whole truth is never completely disclosed.

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