

Narratives of Contamination: Representations of Race, Gender, and Disease  
in Nineteenth Century Cuban Fiction

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation correlates the evolution of biomedical discourse and prose fiction in nineteenth century Havana, Cuba. Both, I argue, function as narratives that shape collective consciousness in that era. Beginning with the cholera epidemic of 1833, medical language increasingly insinuates itself into the constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Cholera gives rise to medical fictions that invade or “contaminate” many domains of Cuban life. In effect, the disease blurred the distinctions between the concepts of contagion, race, and sin; the physical and the moral were thereby collapsed into one category. The city—understood to be a biological extension of the individual—was threatened by barbaric racial “outsiders.” Their intrusive presence corrupted the entire Cuban social body. In the end, the cholera epidemic led to a symbolic, if not a physical, cleansing of the colonial city.

The early Cuban novel functions as a laboratory or *taller* in which theories of purity and disease develop and mature. The individual subject, a microcosm of the larger Cuban social body, becomes the locus of the desire to see and to know enigmatic disease. As the “clinical eye” of the medicalized viewer searches the body for signs of contagion, it defines the hygienic Cuban subject against its impure, racialized Other. However, the novel itself is an agent of contagion, since writing, as Derrida’s *pharmakon*, exacerbates the problem it meant to solve. I argue that the Cuban novel not only unmasked the fiction of stable identities; it also anticipated *fin-de-siècle* European narratives of degeneration and decline.

For Janet and Max.

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## Introduction

### Preface to the Introduction

This dissertation explores the stories of contagion, disease, and hygiene that arose after the 1833 cholera epidemic in Havana, Cuba. Cholera, though not an unexpected epidemic in those days, terrified the entire population. Not only did it throw a monkey wrench into the economic and political gears of a thriving New World port city. At a psychological level, it also greatly disturbed the Habanese population, from city leaders, government representatives, and health officials to everyday citizens, doctors, and writers. As an “equal opportunity” disease, cholera did not discriminate between rich and poor, black and white. Rather, it attacked the pious and the hedonistic, the slaves and the free with seemingly equal vigor. At the end of a three-month period, it had killed nearly one-tenth of the city’s population.

In the struggle to make sense of this monstrous epidemic, powerful mechanisms of interpretation quickly sprung into action. While fear can be a paralyzing force, it can also act as a catalyst for reform or even revolution. Here, in the brief window of time before chaos broke loose, diffuse but powerful webs of discourse spread themselves out in all directions, affecting nearly all dimensions of urban life. Julio Ramos sums it up nicely: “As it traced the movement of cholera, power reconfigured its strategies of domination” (“Citizen” 180). The newly shaped “cartography of power” that arose in cholera’s wake is the subject of my dissertation.

This introduction will briefly outline the relationship between power and some of the most important social concerns of the time. During and after the cholera epidemic, socio-economic and racial oppression acquired a uniquely modern Cuban tinge. Thus I will use the first section, below, to discuss what made Cuba “modern” at this time. Domination began to reconfigure itself through race, gender, and sexuality. I will use another section of this Introduction to explore the way that racialization worked in 1800s Cuba. And the growing field of the social sciences helped to solidify these modern categories. In the last section, I will comment on the power of science to shape modern thought.

### Modernity

The several months during and after the epidemic witnessed a fierce competition by institutions and writers to place meaning on the inexplicable catastrophe. Newspapers, journals, magazines, and books attempted to steer the course of public debate. Illness was alternatively blamed on slaves, the poor, blacks or people of color, vagrants, or anyone who did not fill the fictitious category of a (hetero)normative modern Cuban. The imaginary ideal Cuban citizen practiced perfect moral and physical “hygiene,” an elusive term extending over nearly all of public and private life. Hygiene not only signified sanitation and cleanliness, but it also implied the absence of race, gender, or even sexuality. This mandate seems impossible to fulfill, and it was, but those who were white, male, and heterosexual had at least some chance of being considered proper citizens. Those who lacked any or all of these requisites, on the other hand, were deemed physically and morally unfit for modern life. Paradoxically, then, disease became the trope against which “modern” Cuba attempted to define itself.

Chapter One, “Contagious Invasions,” explores the discursive struggle to define the evasive concept of hygiene as well as to identify its plethora of human and monstrous “others.” If hygiene avoided close scrutiny, its antagonist—contagion—was everywhere. Contagion’s corollaries—poverty, dirt, immorality—could be found on every street corner and at every turn.

All were euphemisms for non-normative race and class. Unfortunately for the most stringent proponents of a “hygienic” Cuba, these abundant adversaries could not be easily extracted from the troubled and particularly heterogeneous social body. A perfectly hygienic Cuba would, in a word, be a classless and “raceless” Cuba. This would mean an island without slaves and the descendants of slaves, or, by extension, the extraordinary wealth that their labor created. Yet while enslaved blacks were largely alienated from Cuban subjecthood and Cuban society, they were, needless to say, integral to the construction of a modern Cuba.

Caribbean critic and Africana scholar Gerard Aching uses the term “moral quagmire” to describe the impossible situation in which Cuba found itself in this era (38). While Cuba was civilized and cosmopolitan by many standards, by others it was a perilous, atavistic backwater. Most notably, the institution of slavery prevented Cuba from adopting the Enlightenment notion of freedom for all of its inhabitants. Yet Cuban slavery itself was modern in the sense that the sugar plantation formed what Sibylle Fischer, following Deleuze and Guattari, calls “a vast machine” in which displaced peoples were forced into a desperate existence of pure exploitation. In *Modernity Disavowed*, Fischer writes, “the sugar plantation was also the site of the first large-scale experiment in industrial agriculture and a laboratory for the exploitation of nature and human labor” (12). In this sense, the Caribbean in general, and Cuba in particular, experimented with capitalist modernity at its most blunt and brutal before these basic practices became pervasive as “wage slavery” in an industrializing Europe.

Sidney Mintz argues this point in his 1974 book *Caribbean Transformations*. While he does not go as far as Eric Williams’ assertion that slavery and the Triangle Trade provided “the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution,”<sup>1</sup> he does claim that the form of slavery practiced in the Caribbean from the 1500s anticipates modern industrial capitalism in Europe. It is worth quoting him at length:

On the whole, plantations were big enterprises for their time, and demanded large quantities of unskilled labor; their work schedules reduced jobs to a simple common denominator, and tended to treat the laborer as interchangeable; capital investment (though highly variable) was usually heavy, and cost accounting commonly made the plantation enterprise a business, its owner a business man more than a planter... The effects of the domination of such enterprises were felt throughout the region, wherever men were brought together in large numbers, with more coercion or less, to plant, harvest, and process; such ‘factories in the field’ go back to the sixteenth century in the islands, and have continuously affected not only the economy of the region, but also the character of its communities and of the people in them. To some important degree, it can be hazarded that Caribbean social history gave to its peoples a life-style adapted to the anonymity, depersonalization, and individualization of modern life, but did so when such phenomena were by no means yet recognized for what they were (257).

It may be wise to note that even if the plantation form of slavery was not capitalist in and of itself, then its relationship with the wider world market certainly was. And whether or not modern industrial capitalism eventually outran slavery, it seems that they were never entirely incompatible. Indeed, Marx’s term “wage slavery” evidences the connection between wage and slave labor. My larger point here is that the Caribbean was, as critics like Ann Laura Stoler and

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<sup>1</sup> See *Capitalism and Slavery*, ix.

Paul Rabinow say of European colonies in general, a “laboratory” for a particularly brutal form of modernity that later circulated through the metropole itself.

This dissertation is not an investigation in history or cultural studies, and thus it does not attempt a direct exploration of industrial modernity in Cuba. However, as an examination of fictional prose narrative in 1830s Cuba, it cannot afford to disregard the social, political, and economic context in which this narrative was created. I believe, like Walter Benjamin, that “a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric” of its society (“The Work of Art” sec. 4). Or, as Angel Rama states more eloquently, art is not outside of culture: “Las obras literarias no están fuera de las culturas sino que las coronan” (*Transculturación* 24). I will not pursue the utility of the argument about “art for art’s sake” here. However, I hope to show with this dissertation that, if not all art is autonomous, then at the very least, it is clear that the narrative prose fiction of 1830s Cuba cannot be extricated from its local context. With this in mind, I turn to the thorny issue at the heart of early Cuban literary expression.

## Race

About a hundred years after the time period which I study, Fernando Ortiz publishes his seminal work *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940). Ortiz accounts for Cuban history’s uniqueness by explaining it through transculturation, a term he coins himself. An update on the anthropological term *acculturation*, *transculturation* in Ortiz’s definition addresses both sides of the centuries long socio-racial divide in Cuba. No longer is the exploited side of the master/slave binary assumed to undergo forced acculturation to the other, more dominant side. Rather, *transculturation* encompasses both the original white colonizer as well as the enslaved colonized subject in the mutual process of assimilating to each other and to the Caribbean plantation environment. In brief, Ortiz deftly deconstructs the oppositional fantasies of black slave and white landowner, African barbarism and European modernity. He sees racism as oppressive—if not equally—to all involved. In addition, he celebrates Cuba’s racial interconnection and interdependence, and transculturation’s creativity as well as its constrictive elements. Without meaning to disparage the enormous importance of Ortiz’s work, I also wonder if he subsumes the exquisite pain of race slavery’s legacy under a generalized oppression that purportedly informs Cuban culture more broadly.<sup>2</sup> He writes of the colonial situation in Cuba:

En mayor o menor grado de disociación estuvieron en Cuba así los negros como los blancos. Todos convivientes, arriba o abajo, en un mismo ambiente de terror y de fuerza; terror del oprimido por el castigo, terror del opresor por la revancha; todos fueron de justicia, fuera de ajuste, fuera de sí. Y todos en trance doloroso de transculturación a un nuevo ambiente cultural (259).

In this articulation, *la convivencia* signals, rather than coexistence, equal amounts of terror for those above and those below, equal quantities of oppression for all sectors of Cuban society. In the slave colony and post-colony, nothing remains outside of this powerful vortex. Everyone is trapped by one form of domination or another. No one is free, and everyone suffers, if not in the same precise manner, then in equal amounts and to an equal extreme. Transculturation, for Ortiz, defines Cuba in a way that spreads across history and remains beyond the reach of any particular social group or set of political or economic interests.

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<sup>2</sup> It is crucial to note that Ortiz wrote the *Contrapunteo* two decades before the Cuban Revolution. During this time many white (and) property-owning Cubans left the island, thus escaping the precise sort of oppression that he discusses in the passage cited above.

The problem with this formulation is that it places everyone on more or less the same plane, so that slave and slave owner, man and woman, black and white, as part of the same system, seem to be equally oppressed. Not everyone reads Ortiz this way. Fernando Coronil, in his 1995 introduction to the translation of Ortiz's seminal work, vigorously argues against this point. He states that "Ortiz treats binary oppositions not as fixities, but as hybrid and productive, reflecting their transcultural formation and their transitional value in the flow of Cuban history" (xiv). While I respect this assessment, I also want to emphasize in this dissertation that oppression is not the same across race, class, gender, and sexuality. These categories, however artificial and fictitious and constructed they might be, are still as real as ever for *los de abajo* if not for *los de arriba*. Transculturation, however powerful, does not transcend these divisions or encourage peaceful transactions between opposing peoples.

With this in mind, I suggest that, in the 1830s, not only was transculturation far more destructive than creative, but that certain sectors of the Cuban population were singled out as examples of failed or poor cultural assimilation. These, incidentally, were the same groups blamed for the spread of cholera. They were the poor, the homeless, the vagrants, people of color, those without property, those with strange affectations or affiliations, and of course, women. Using these individual character types as synecdoche for an ailing body politic, the pervasive discourse of the time convinced the public imagination that Cuban society itself, the larger body politic, was afflicted with disease. Uncomfortably aware that the island's economy could not survive intact without slavery and a large underclass of nominally free black workers, government officials and city leaders resorted to other means of repressing and ostracizing the marginalized populations even further. An emphasis on surveillance became a way to spur the "citizen body" to keep watch over its abject extremities (or unwanted Cubans) through the promotion and spread of moral uprightness or collective "hygiene." As it was defined, proper hygiene consistently evaded society's non-white, non-prosperous members. In other words, as a working class mulato it was difficult if not impossible to acquire and possess the hygiene required of a good Cuban citizen. Just as Gerard Aching says of the nineteenth century's concept of civilization, "it was to whiteness... that modern civilization accrued" (41). I would substitute the word "hygiene" for "civilization," but one could use any of a myriad of words of affirmation praise for the white population. Using illness as a metaphor, didacticians trained the body social to avoid contact with its "antihygienic" parts. It was believed that contact would breed illness, promote disease, and spread virulent tendencies across diverse sectors of the population.

Perhaps inadvertently, early 1830s writers helped to cement the pigeonholing of societal "others" through literary representation. Some authors, such as Ramón de Palma, whose work we shall discuss in Chapter Three, did promote acculturation to a Europeanized norm. Palma's novel *El cólera en la Habana* uses the disease as a blessing in disguise and catalyst for positive social change. His characters survive the epidemic and go on to promote the European model of the self-contained modern nuclear family. His model of the white creole woman, the angel in the house, functions as a kind of *contrapunto* to the demonized woman of color.<sup>3</sup> However, many more writers showed a pervasive interest in the abnormal, the deviant, the contaminated, or the diseased. "Otherness" is just as often an uncontrolled desire as it is a perverse individual. José Zacarías González del Valle (in Chapter Two) explores non-normative contact between two white cholera-infected women, while Cirilio Villaverde (in Chapter Four) plumbs the depths of contagious white male lust for the not-quite-white female. While the point of this negative focus was purportedly to spur the population as a whole to improve itself through its behavior, over

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<sup>3</sup> See Jean Lamore's examples in his article "La mulata en el discurso literario y medico francés del siglo diecinueve" (305).

time literature's emphasis gradually shifted toward more pessimistic assessments. By the last decades of the century, the ailing citizen body was not quite so curable. Whatever the case, these writers demonstrated an almost obsessive fascination with embodied deviance.

Sander Gilman, in his classic article entitled "Black Bodies, White Bodies," examines the aesthetic conventions that govern the art of the nineteenth century. While he focuses on the visual representation of women, the figures he examines—the Hottentot Venus, the white prostitute—also affect the world of literature. Although he looks primarily at French visual art, Gilman also addresses the pernicious influence of these earlier icons on nineteenth century culture in general. The aesthetic ideals of the time dovetailed with newly formed scientific conventions such that blacks and women were now deemed medically—not just aesthetically—inferior. Sander Gilman will return to our discussion in Chapter Four. I wanted to mention him now because, as a historian of stereotypes, his research has had an enormous impact on my thinking about race. Stereotypes link the individual to her class or race through the creation and cementation of character "types." Gilman argues that the aesthetic sphere played a crucial role in the consolidation of certain stereotypes; namely, the linkage between the black race, the sexualized female body, and deviance.

## Science

Sander Gilman's work also questions the certitude with which medical conventions were and are accepted as fact, while art, in contrast, was and is not. Medicine, as a whole, is seen as more scientific and thus more objective than the realm of the aesthetic. Both, however, have worked together—in the past as in the present—to abnormalize certain subjects in such a way as to render their "otherness" natural. In Chapter Two, "Disease Represented," I examine the homosocial desire of two young girls. Although they come from elite white creole families and seem to incarnate the Cuban bourgeois aesthetic of racelessness, these two Cubans manifest what I call *somaticized affect*, an unacceptably excessive non-normativity in their behavior and bodily practices. Somaticized affect may or may not be discursively linked to the girls' contamination and death by cholera. I, following the writer, suggest that it is. While he attempts scientific objectivity in his examination of their lives, his story shows that science is as much a construction of the mind, and of desire, as is narrative fiction itself.

Science in general, and medicine in particular, played a powerful role in categorizing and classifying nineteenth century thought. Decades before Darwin and Spencer, Auguste Comte created a paradigm for the view of biological and social organisms as linked together in one vast spiderweb-like network. Not only was the social body analogous to a living organism, but living organisms themselves—especially those less blessed by socio-biological perfection, like people of color and women—were coming under increased scrutiny by doctors and social scientists. Woman's body, as synecdoche for a troubled public body, promised to provide a clue to the social problems accompanying industrial modernity. It was implied that if Woman, through proper and rigid surveillance of her body and its desires, could be rehabilitated, then so by extension could the human race.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault charts the medicalization of socially marginalized groups. He includes women and the poor, but according so many critics does not focus sufficiently on the colonized or on people of color. In the Caribbean, race played a much larger factor in the process of abnormalization than it did in Europe. While the Spanish may have been seen as the "dregs"<sup>4</sup> of Europe, there was nothing on that continent remotely approximating the

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<sup>4</sup> See Aronna 17.

kind of racial paranoia that pervaded in the many of the New World colonies. The marginalized populations in the Caribbean, especially, were much more likely to include enslaved Africans and their mixed-race descendants than were their counterparts in Europe, who tended to be social, political, or economic outsiders.

Michael Aronna argues that in general “the medicalization of the subaltern was a fundamental task of modernity” (14). Although he specifically discusses late century Latin America in his book *‘Pueblos Enfermos,’* the same can be accurately said of early century Cuba. For Aronna, modernity and scientific discourse are inextricably linked: “The drive to isolate and classify the organically and socially ill was part of a greater project to rationalize, modernize and industrialize the nation.” Aronna is speaking specifically of the Latin American nation-states that gained sovereignty in the first half of the nineteenth century. Of course, Cuba in 1830 was by no means a modern nation in the contemporary sense of the word. It remained a Spanish colony until the turn of the twentieth century. However, many of the modernizing scientific impulses of its plantation society appeared independently of the Industrial Revolution in Europe or the establishment of nation-states in the New World. By the 1840s, Cuba was distinctly more modern than parts of the metropole—as I will discuss in Chapter One. Thus, Aronna’s claim that nineteenth century discourses on progress, modernity, and the nation used scientific and medical thought is as true of Cuba as it is of Spain, Uruguay, and Bolivia.

Chapter Three of the dissertation, “Remedying Disease,” explores an idealized version of the hygienic modern Cuban social body, while Chapter Four, “The Early Cecilias,” examines its opposite, a nation under threat. Both chapters argue that scientific discourse had already begun to insinuate itself into the narrative prose fiction of the 1830s in Cuba. Most critics prefer to discuss the pervasiveness of scientific thought at the end of the century, by which time natural history had strongly imposed itself on social history. Yet the confluence of medicine with literature did not happen overnight. The novels I discuss represent one stage in a growing phenomenon, a movement that would only intensify over the course of the century. As the social and physical sciences began to acquire a more and more authoritative voice in popular culture, literature appropriated them to legitimize itself. Biomedical discourse, which had begun to rear its head in Cuba during the 1833 cholera epidemic, makes its presence fully felt here. While Chapter Three finds a social cure for a choleric population, Chapter Four points to a growing pessimism regarding the health and vibrancy of Cuba and its people. In these short previews to Villaverde’s 1882 foundational Cuban novel *Cecilia Valdés*, the two 1839 versions of *Cecilia* demonstrate the author’s struggle with the theories of socio-cultural genetic determinism. On the one hand, he seems to believe that the youth and vigor of his eponymous protagonist will overcome the adversities of race and class. On the other, his calibrated meliorism is tempered by a growing sense that race does in fact determine fate. At heart, Cecilia represents that racial contamination without which Cuba—in 1833 or 1882—would not be Cuba.

## Conclusion

Despite the pessimism with which Villaverde describes modern Cuba, his book can also be read as a celebration of *la Cuba mulata*, a concept that many writers and critics alike have reappropriated, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as a symbol of national pride. While this dissertation sadly cannot attempt an in-depth analysis of the final version of *Cecilia Valdés*, much remains to be said about Villaverde’s complex relationship with race. As one of his characters will say of interracial mixing, it is Cubans’ collective *adorado tormento* (CV 332). Fear and desire, hygiene and contagion, black and white cannot be artificially separated.

Together they form a narrative, a discourse, a vivid *contrapunteo* that defines life in Cuba now as then. Unfortunately, a prolonged discussion of the final version of *Cecilia Valdés* will have to wait for a full book project. For now, I will restrain myself to that most important but overlooked decade of the 1830s, in which the possibility of a positive future for the Cuban nation still looked somewhat rosy, light, and bright, if not entirely *blanqueada*. That era, though terrifying in its own way, also seemed to promise some kind of collective redemption through narrative fictional imaginings.

## Chapter One, “Contagious Invasions”

### Introduction: Outbreak in the City

Less than a week after the revelries of Carnival in February of 1833, the infamous cholera pandemic that had been traveling the world since 1817 made its appearance on the shores of Cuba. It settled on the bustling and prosperous port city of Havana, beginning with the outer neighborhoods (the *extramuros*<sup>1</sup>) and flowing inward toward the city center. To those residents anxious about the increasingly unmanageable racial heterogeneity of the urban population, it appeared that justice had been served. Cholera signified divine castigation for what some citizens referred to as the excesses of debauchery, the degradation of morals, and the lack of self-control exhibited by segments of the population during the riotous pre-Lenten festivities (Calcagno, *Tratado* 56-7).

At first, the outbreak’s attack on the geographically exposed *extramuros* conveniently reinforced pre-existing attitudes about the demographics of the urban landscape. Never mind that the neighborhood where cholera was first documented was the least insalubrious of the suburban communities (Mena, “No Common Folk” 82). The white elites associated the *extramuros* with the poverty and immorality of social and racial outliers. Thus the epidemic’s initial geographic selection only reinforced their previously held assumptions. It seemed to make moral and sanitary sense that the *extramuros* neighborhoods—the areas most besieged by nature’s wrath, raw sewage, detritus, fires, and flooding—were the first to suffer the epidemic. Namely, these areas lacked the cultural and commercial prestige of the city center. Coincidentally or not, the city’s economically marginalized neighborhoods were predominantly Afro-Creole. Their social and racial “otherness” encouraged members of the white elite—both Creole and Peninsular Spanish—to draw a conceptual map of the city. Whites attempted to convince themselves of their physical and moral distance from the “dangerous” classes and from the deadly bacteria they hosted. However, no discursive cordon sanitaire could separate the disadvantaged sectors from the affluent white(r) ones. Whether in the streets of the commercial center or the heavily residential *extramuros* neighborhoods, racial mixing was an integral part of daily lived experience. However, physical contact and cultural exchange only promulgated irrational fears of disease and contagion. This chapter will explore the process by which Havana became an incubator for the propagation of theories linking illness to race and class. Cholera’s discursive aftermath would help mold this colonial city into an emblem of a modern society at the vanguard of nineteenth century biomedical and social science.

The Habanese reaction to cholera appears to mimic the earlier European responses to the same epidemic. It has become impossible to mention the term “mimic” without being reminded of Homi Bhabha’s colonial definition, and indeed, its connotations can be useful here. While the epidemic in France, for instance, sharpened the collective sense of the “other” as poor, bilious,<sup>2</sup> or degenerate, cholera in Cuba consolidated the “other” as poor, bilious, and black. Thus Caribbean “others” were “almost the same” as their continental counterparts, “but not quite” (Bhabha, *Location* 122-23). This devious new form of cholera, though it imitated its European predecessor, also appeared to deride the facility with which the epidemic had helped strengthen the (relatively) facile European categories of “us” versus “them,” or “healthy” versus “choleric.” Cuban cholera thus mimicked and mocked its Old World antecedent.

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<sup>1</sup> *Extramuros* is an adverb meaning “outside [the city walls],” but it will be used in this dissertation, as it was in 1830s Cuba, as a noun.

<sup>2</sup> I mean to use this term as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary in the following way: “Of diseases and temperament: Affected by, or arising from, too great a secretion of bile, or from bilious derangement” (see the OED online). In this sense, (propensity toward) cholera stems from a “bilious” temperament.

Residents of the island of Cuba had long been studying the patterns of the epidemic in Europe and were well aware of its ravages on the Continent and in Britain. For years, the local press in Havana had been publishing a steady stream of news regarding cholera outbreaks in Asia, Europe, Canada, and the United States. This allowed the Habanese reading public plenty of time to preemptively formulate discursive responses to a possible outbreak in their city. Because cholera had yet to reach the Iberian Peninsula, concrete information on the epidemic stemmed primarily from northern Europe. France in particular, which was widely held to be the most medically advanced nation in the world, had experienced a devastating epidemic the previous year.<sup>3</sup> The ravages of and responses to the epidemic in Paris held a horrifying fascination for a Caribbean society culturally colonized by modernity's capital.<sup>4</sup>

Cholera in Paris proved to be one of the best-documented outbreaks in modern Europe. The French reading public consumed information about the mysterious new disease with a voracity only matched by the gluttony of the epidemic itself. Newspapers, journals, public health announcements, lectures, and memoirs flooded the public sphere with reports on the dead and dying, debates on the nature of the disease, and solutions for stopping its spread. Middle class doctors, government representatives, journalists, and intellectuals interpreted the disease according to a narrow set of Enlightenment ideals concerning the rationality and progress of Western societies (Kudlick, *Cholera* 65). Since Paris was widely accepted to be the pinnacle of such civilization, French values were assumed by default to be superior to all others. According to these values, the atavistic "others" of bourgeois Parisian culture lagged behind in the inevitable forward march of modernity. French medical wisdom portrayed the disease as class- and (to the extent that racial categories were applicable) even race-specific. The marginalized working poor, for instance, were portrayed in popular media as a "race" of "barbarians" unsuitably inhabiting the city. This unfortunate population, the so-called "suffering classes," was considered disease's prime target.

Havana, in its turn, produced a glut of responses to the epidemic's transcontinental journey. When cholera finally reached Cuban shores, the major newspapers, journals, and public health entities only intensified the barrage of cholera-inspired messages, opinions, and advice for the reading public. In terms of the epidemic and its remedies, the Creole elite of Havana largely accepted the Enlightenment ideal of human advancement and perfectibility, albeit with a dash of Spanish Catholicism added to the *mélange*. Thus, in addition to proclaiming their faith in the effectiveness of religious poems and prayers, Habanese respected the prominent public role of medical doctors—men of science—as guardians of modern knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Middle class Cubans were quick to condemn the lifestyles and behaviors of the lower classes for their supposed propensity toward illness. Like bourgeois Parisians, Havana residents blamed the "backward" poor for their purported immorality and vice, characteristics that were thought to encourage disease. In Paris, recent arrivals from the impoverished countryside—those who displayed visual or linguistic markers of *étrangeté*—were often blamed for the proliferation of illness. In a similar manner, Havana's outsiders became the racialized poor, unfit for modern life *intramuros*. The colonial difference, of course, was that in the Caribbean, the poor were most often enslaved Africans, recently freed slaves, or their descendants. The Cuban elite's relationship with these marginalized populations would only increase the tension between the post-Enlightenment

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<sup>3</sup> See Quevedo and Gutiérrez 163-68, as well as Kudlick, *Cholera*.

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey calls nineteenth century Paris "capital of modernity." See Harvey, *Paris*.

<sup>5</sup> See López-Denis, "Disease" 194-97; Ramos, "Citizen" 187.

modernity with which Cuba sought to associate itself, and the plantation slavery on which its particular form of capitalism was vigorously dependent.

### Historical Backdrop

The Cuba of the early 1830s presented a uniquely complex set of social, political, and economic circumstances. On the one hand, it remained a dependent colony of the Iberian metropolis. On the other, since the late eighteenth century it had transformed itself into a wealthy commercial empire in its own right. Plantation slavery both helped and hindered Cuba's precocious but uneven entrance into industrial modernity. To put it crudely, black slaves from Africa provided the "raw materials"<sup>6</sup> fueling technological and scientific expansion in Cuba. Through race slavery, the Creole oligarchy had discovered an ingenious shortcut to industrial development. Cuba's brand of modernity was a unique combination of technological innovation and northern European-style social progress. Influential for the Creole elite were French debates on freedom, equality, and the natural rights of man, as well as the early abolitionism of religious groups like the Quakers in Britain and the United States. Yet slavery was integral to a growing sense of *Cubanidad*. To complicate matters, because the majority of slave traders were Spaniards, slavery also reinforced the colony's dependence on an imperial Spain that many Creoles felt was decadent, decaying, and even impotent (Mena, "No Common Folk" 77). Slavery signified an "aberration of modernity" for intellectuals who sought to align Cuba with the liberal democracies of post-Enlightenment Europe and North America (131).

Next, the population had to grapple with the difficult question of how to transform a slave society into an economy reliant on wage labor. European moral and religious leaders had begun to challenge the institution of slavery from the beginning of the eighteenth century. As early as 1776, Adam Smith had declared in *The Wealth of Nations* that slavery was an anachronistic institution unequipped to compete with free labor. In 1807, Britain formally abolished the slave trade within its empire. By the 1830s it was already clear to progressive Creole thinkers that slavery would someday be obsolete.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, imperial Britain pressured Cuba to help "make the world safe for free labor" (Finch 102). At this time the capital city was teeming with black and mixed-race Habanese who had managed to buy,<sup>8</sup> receive or inherit their freedom. They eked out a living by partaking in the manual labor that whites for the most part refused to perform. The Creole bourgeoisie resisted incorporating slaves and free blacks into the Cuban national imaginary. Although they felt "enslaved"<sup>9</sup> by their political and economic system, they preferred it to an independence shared with blacks and mulatos. According to Gerard Aching:

[T]his community refused to consider the abolition of slaves as a means of freeing itself from the hypocrisy of a distinction that was imposed from Madrid and ultimately lucrative for what remained of the Spanish empire and for itself in the 1840s (44).

These complex factors created a singularly difficult predicament. By the time cholera made its appearance on the island, the plantation boom had successfully placed Cuba at the vanguard of industrial and economic progress, but any social cohesion was undermined by the internal

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<sup>6</sup> I take this term from Richard Rosa, who has called black figures in nineteenth century Cuban antislavery fiction the "raw materials" from which the national imaginary was formed.

<sup>7</sup> "[T]here existed among the Cuban intelligentsia the anguish caused by the knowledge of the island's total dependence on slavery and the plantation economy just as the latter system appeared to be in world historical retreat as a viable economic and social paradigm" (Alonso 72).

<sup>8</sup> This practice, called "*coartación*," enabled a slave to purchase his freedom through a sort of layaway program.

<sup>9</sup> See Aching 42. Cirilio Villaverde also takes up this notion in *Cecilia Valdés* (2004) 168.

contradictions of class, race, and competing political ideologies. Cuba found itself at the brink of a peculiarly modern crisis.<sup>10</sup> Cholera was the disastrous culmination of a long-term program aimed at eradicating modernity's Others—blacks, the poor—from the Cuban social body.

Of course, the epidemic outbreak did not limit itself to the “suffering classes,” those whom the exclusionary logic of *Cubanidad* necessarily marginalized. Much to the dismay of both the Creole elite and the Spanish colonial authorities, cholera would not be contained by mere city walls. Within days it had swept through all of Havana, killing off rich and poor, black and white victims with apparent equanimity. It was no surprise to anyone that the disease wiped out the slave population with double its accustomed zeal. By summer it had literally decimated the city's population, and the rate of plantation slave deaths was twice as high (López-Denis, “Disease” 186). Due to the very real economic and social marginalization of urban blacks and mulatos, the Cuban strain of the disease would never shake off its initial association with race. Not only was this particular epidemic described in racialized terms, but disease itself—often personified as a dangerous vagabond or hungry scavenger—was thought to favor the socially or racially marginalized.<sup>11</sup> The Creole bourgeoisie as well as the colonial authorities collectively defined cholera as a plague that preferred the unenlightened, those untouched by modernity's generous but limited embrace. This unfortunate category contrasted the bourgeoisie, “la clase más acomodada, y más ilustrada” with those pertaining to “la clase más ínfima, la más ignorante, la más mal alimentada y mal abrigada...” (Calcagno, *Tratado* 35). Indeed, as Adrián López-Denis remarks in his study of illnesses in colonial Cuba, cholera has always been defined primarily as a social disease (“Disease” 149).

The real—but as yet unknown—bacteriological causes of cholera reinforced the perception that sickness was linked to poverty. It is true that there was a higher incidence of poverty among blacks than among whites. But it does not follow that whites were less affected by the epidemic than their black counterparts. We now understand that cholera is propagated through drinking water contaminated by fecal matter containing the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*.<sup>12</sup> For reasons as yet unknown, cholera's symptoms affect only about ten percent of an infected population. It is not uncommon for individuals to carry the bacterium without developing the disease. In the fall 2010 cholera outbreak in Haiti, for instance, while well over 100,000 people were infected, but only about 4,000 died of the disease.<sup>13</sup> In the spring of 2012, the Pan American Health Organization estimated that the resurgent cholera epidemic could infect up to 250,000 people in the year, but that it had killed “only” 7,000 by May.<sup>14</sup> Cholera's high incidence among the urban poor, then as now, was concretely linked to precarious sanitary conditions. Yet all of Havana's neighborhoods suffered from poor sanitation. López-Denis documents the mountains of feces and other waste visible in the streets (“Disease” 167-68). While the Board of Health attempted to transport garbage out of the affluent neighborhoods and into the slums, the entire city reeked of filth. No neighborhood was exempt from this sanitary nightmare. According to Luz Mena's investigations, the neighborhood of San Lázaro—where the first victim succumbed to cholera—was neither the poorest nor the most racially marginalized (“No Common Folk” 146). Its tough, calcareous soil helped contribute to the relatively small amount of muddy raw sewage on the surface of the streets. Thus there was no logical explanation

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<sup>10</sup> Cuba's unique situation of “colonial modernity” was rendered all the more paradoxical by the persistence of that “peculiar institution,” slavery. See Gerard Aching.

<sup>11</sup> For such personifications of cholera, see contemporary publications such as *El Álbum*, *La Moda*, *El Plantel*, *La Revista bimestre cubana*, as well as *El Diario de la Habana*.

<sup>12</sup> See the WHO's “Health Topics: Cholera.”

<sup>13</sup> See “Haiti—Cholera epidemic...”

<sup>14</sup> See “Haiti's Cholera Crisis.”

for the seemingly random appearance of cholera in the barrio of San Lázaro. In an effort to rationalize the inexplicable, medical theory strengthened the extant association between indigence, disease, race, and vice. This fabrication, though not completely arbitrary, draws more power from imagination than from fact: “Poverty/ dirt/ immorality: the association is constitutive of the discourse on health, pointing to the complex, overdetermined texture of hygiene whose multiple meanings and effects certainly move beyond physiological concerns” (Ramos, “Citizen” 184).

### **Socio-Racial Deviance**

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault reminds us that beginning in the late eighteenth century, the medical conception of illness evolved into something more than a mere lack of physical health per se. Rather, it gradually became much more broadly defined as an inability to meet the rigid standards of normativity as defined by the Enlightenment. In Foucault’s modern Paris, for instance, middle class identity excluded criminals, prostitutes, the poor, revolutionaries, single women, and racial or social minorities—all of those whose behavior or life circumstances set them apart from the incipient bourgeois ideal. Although the normalized classes consisted of a rather amorphous population, members of this nebulous group were at least aware of what they were *not*. According to social historian Catherine Kudlick, a traumatic event such the 1832 epidemic in Paris served to clarify the heretofore blurry and indistinct divide between normal, healthy subjects and their deviant counterparts. The construction of “otherness” was necessary in order for a workable concept of “normality” to arise in the first place. In distinguishing the normative and healthy citizens from those “abnormal” groups, Paris’ cholera epidemic functioned as a useful and timely consolidator of bourgeois identity (Kudlick, “Cholera” 27-8).

In Cuba, the construction of social deviance was even more complex. By the early nineteenth century, the racial heterogeneity of the island’s expanding population led to intense anxieties on the part of the power elite. Increasing the confusion, the elite itself was divided between the conservative Creole *sacarocracia* (sugar barons fat off the profits of plantation slavery), the *soi-disant* “progressive” Creole intellectuals, and an array of Spanish Peninsular traders, administrators, and settlers. In addition to economic tension, the multitude of class hierarchies was influenced by the absolute lack of clear divisions between the colonizers and the colonized. In an urban economy increasingly affected by the waged labor of freed slaves and their descendants, traditional oppositions of power became blurred. Despite these social fissures, all of these groups could agree to a mutual interest in stemming the alarming proliferation of free blacks and mulatos. Of particular worry was the growing middle class of entrepreneurs of color, who had gained some measure of economic—if not cultural—acceptance. It was difficult for the middle and upper classes to imagine how black former slaves could be modern, and this puzzle remained at the heart of the Cuban paradox. The white populations—Spanish as well as Creole—seemed anxious to promote the discursive association between social and racial outsiders. Medical discourse helped legitimize the de facto marginalization of non-white communities by depicting them as social, moral, and medical deviants. In addition, it helped begin to define the proto-national<sup>15</sup> white Creole bourgeoisie, in particular, against its racialized set of Creole “others” by depicting the latter as perennially afflicted by either behavioral excess or internal lack of control. The thorny issue of how to classify Peninsular Spaniards was temporarily put

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<sup>15</sup> I use this term for lack of a more adequate one. Though many scholars talk about Cuban nationalism at this time, they are generally referring to the Cuban national imaginary rather than the Cuban state per se. See for example Schulman, Luis, Aching, Sommer, Ramos.

aside as the Creole-led debate focused on what it meant to be Cuban. Doctors often construed the abnormal as inherently bilious (“coléricos”) in nature (Calcagno, *Aviso* 5). Inward bile “naturally” encouraged a person’s behavior to deviate from the expected norm: “El cólera-morbus ataca con más frecuencia a las personas de temperamento bilioso” (5). Cholera then became an outward manifestation of an inability to assimilate white bourgeois culture and comportment. The following passage from Calcagno offers a good example of the belief that nonnormative subjects were predisposed to sickness, dementia, and crime:

Los individuos dotados de una complexion débil, de un moral abatido, triste o pusilánime; los que se hallan debilitados por su desarreglo en el modo de vivir, o por la miseria, que habitan en casas húmedas, estrechas e insalubres; los que están amontonados en los hospitales o en las cárceles; los que no tienen una prolija asistencia, todos corren un peligro mucho más inminente que los que se hallan en circunstancias más favorables (*Tratado* 66).

Following dominant French medical knowledge, popular wisdom held that the lower classes, the “dirt-poor,” were particularly prone to disease. Mary Poovey reminds us that in the early nineteenth century, morality and health were still considered inextricable from an individual’s economic situation (11). In accordance with this theory, Cuban doctors blamed cholera’s propagation on “la clase más pobre,” which covered all “individuos disolutos [débiles] entregados a excesos en la comida y bebida, a los que se han separado del camino de la virtud y degradado su moral por las pasiones deshonorosas” (Calcagno, *Tratado* 35, 56). Before medical theory codified the purported link between poverty and immorality, the transatlantic cholera epidemic provided an opportunity to advance these pseudo-scientific theories. Catherine Kudlick quotes one French writer who believed that cholera favored the poorer quarters of the city because “it finds bodies and souls marvelously predisposed to receiving its deadly influences” (*Cholera* 56). From the class specificity of the Parisian strain of the disease, it was not a far leap to suppose that certain *races* of people might be more susceptible to its power. Indeed, white residents of the island of Cuba must have felt that the emerging vocabulary describing the epidemic in Europe was tailor-made for their purposes. They often literally transposed French medical terms onto the Cuban situation. According to many a medical doctor, slaves, free blacks, undisciplined women, and other unruly types were morally as well as physically “predisposed” to the disease (Coloma y Garcés 19-20). For example, Coloma considers blacks, and especially slaves, to be “por naturaleza indolentes e incapaces de observar el más leve principio higiénico” (10). Thus it is in their “nature” to be unclean.

White Cuban and Spanish populations on all points of the political spectrum concurred: cholera preferred to feed off “la clase más infeliz de la sociedad” (*Recopilación* 23). As we now understand, a person’s racial identity or geographic origin have no relation to the rate at which cholera affects its victims. Instead, according to the World Health Organization, cholera strikes “where water supply, sanitation, food safety, and hygiene are inadequate.”<sup>16</sup> All of 1830s Havana—as well as most of 1830s Paris—could fit inside this definition. Yet medical discourse needed a scapegoat. Racially and morally deviant bodies lent themselves usefully to an understanding of poverty and lack of hygiene.

Although the term originally referred to enslaved Africans, “infeliz” or “miserable” soon become code words for poor, black, diseased, ungovernable, or otherwise evolutionarily

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<sup>16</sup> See “Health Topics: Cholera” on the WHO’s website.

“backwards”—slave or free. Even before the outbreak, the well-off white residents of Havana had been growing distinctly uneasy with the steadily increasing urban population of free persons of color. The arrival of cholera helped solidify a class- and race-based discourse infused with medical, legal, and administrative articulations. To define a person as malnourished, poorly clothed, lacking in proper education, and prone to gambling, drink, sex, or other types of excess was to signify both an individual’s bilious nature and (more importantly) her or his fundamental “otherness.” Inability to rigidly control one’s behavior betrayed a person’s imposter status within Cuban modernity. Poverty or other misfortune signaled one’s inner flaws, a natural tendency for deviance, and predisposition towards illness. In this way, the term “suffering classes” quickly accrued multiple layers of meaning.

A wide variety of politicians, administrators, and intellectuals as well as medical doctors helped shape the theory that race and heredity were central components of susceptibility to disease. In an influential treatise on cholera, the Creole historian José Antonio Saco remarks, “El mal parece que respeta hasta cierto punto a los europeos y sus descendientes, pero que se encarniza contra los asiáticos y africanos...” Although he is now understood to be a white supremacist, these comments were typical of the moderately “progressive” Creoles of his day. (In fact, Saco was much more of an abolitionist than many of his contemporaries.) Saco then poses a rhetorical question to his bourgeois Euro-Creole readership: “¿Será que la suma de conocimientos que posee la raza europea le proporcione ventajas sociales con que hacer frente a la enfermedad...?” (*Carta* 20). He reiterates the obvious advantages of being a normative gold standard: “hombre, blanco, culto, y moderado” and therefore free from the racial, cultural, gender, or moral inclinations that signal innate excess or lack, vice or disease. Yet he also leaves open the possibility that European *conocimientos* can be learned or achieved. Saco implies that certain types of individuals—though one wonders who—can be trained in culture and moderation. Intriguingly, he does not distinguish *between* the types of Europeans inclined to illness. Perhaps taking a rare opportunity to dispel intra-European tensions, in this text he focuses on the differences between those of European versus African or “Asiatic” heritage.

### **The Appearance of Progress**

Key to the construction of racialized social divisions was the concept of moral and physical progress. Northern Europeans, associated with the temporal forward march of industrial modernity, viewed themselves as socially, culturally, and evolutionarily superior to their racialized counterparts. The self-aggrandizement of the Parisian bourgeoisie successfully colonized the minds of those who aspired to similar cultivation. In contrast, Spain—with its heterogeneous racial heritage, physical proximity to the African coast, and subaltern European status—appeared to lean perilously back towards cultural, political, and economic atavism. For these reasons, Spain seemed to be a nation that modernity had left behind (Aronna 11-33). As generations of Spanish subjects grew and flourished on Cuban soil, these Creoles tended to align themselves with the Enlightenment values of northern Europe and the United States rather than with the rigid ideals of Catholic Spain. Technological or industrial advancement marched in lock-step with northern European racial, cultural, and moral superiority. For the nascent proto-national movement in Cuba, Anglo-Saxon cultures were the ones most worthy of New World imitation. For instance, despite its industrial production of black coal, England still signified the epitome of purity and cleanliness. Indeed, Creole scholar José de la Luz y Caballero concurs with Saco when he asks rhetorically, “¿habrá país en el orbe que pueda competir en salubridad con la Inglaterra?...¿dónde se nos presenta la raza humana ménos degenerada, más bella y más

lozana que en las islas Británicas?” (*Contestación* 307). Health, beauty, progress: these became the bywords of what López-Denis calls the “sanitary rhetoric of modernity” (“Higiene pública” 13).

According to this rhetoric, modern cholera rationally preferred to feast on those neighborhoods where both material poverty and the physical traits of the “African race” were visibly discernable. Yet Creole and Spanish intellectuals alike cautioned against judging predisposition toward health or sickness by appearance alone. As we will see in the following chapters, appearance did not necessarily determine inner essence.

Attempts to control public reactions to the disease resulted in competing fragmentary appraisals of the city. The importance of distinguishing between inward *ser* and outward *parecer* applied not only to specific *barrios*, but also to the urban body as a whole. The oft-feminized city of Havana, for example, was widely thought in the early nineteenth century to be a deceptively beautiful metropolis. The known charm of its façades and pretty colonial architecture masked rampant corruption and filthy interiors (Mena, “No Common Folk 60). For instance, it was common for travelers to remark on their delightful first impressions of the city as seen from afar:

Havana, and its harbor, however, viewed from our quarter-deck, presented a picture not surpassed by even that of Naples and its celebrated bay. The eye could not cease to dwell on it, surrounded, as it was, on nearly all sides, by hills covered with luxuriant verdure... (Wurdeman 17).

Numerous foreign visitors, among them the Scottish surgeon John Howison, romanticize the “clusters of houses fancifully painted and adorned with verandas, terraces, and balconies, where groups of Spanish ladies sit enjoying the sea-breeze, and slaves stroll idly, awaiting their master’s call” (Howison 567). From the safe distance of a balcony or a boat, male observers were charmed and titillated by the “picturesque” appearance of the city (563). When, however, they found themselves in the midst of the “hubbub that prevails, and the frightful black figures that create it” they were overwhelmed by an acute sense of unease (567). While the city remains outwardly beautiful, especially from a distance, this disease taints and perturbs the white observer. For Howison, insalubrity has a concrete source:

The city is indeed filled and surrounded with sources of disease. The streets are badly aired and odiously dirty; the water is obnoxious to the eye and to the taste, and the harbour forms a receptacle for the innumerable impurities which are daily thrown from four or five hundred vessels of all descriptions and sizes. The miasmata arising from such a quantity of putrescent materials, conjoined with the scorching heat of the sun, soon operate upon a European constitution, and produce the most fatal consequences (570).

Thus the city is described in an inconsistent manner; moreover, its appearance is not always an accurate indicator of its innate qualities. The same is true for Paris and other sinful modern cities whose attractiveness belied their inner degradation.

The “contagious” enthusiasm with which a city such as Havana captivated its visitors stemmed from one of several factors, depending on the writer’s perspective. Havana’s “infectious” energy was due either to the racially ambiguous nature of its mixed population, or alternatively, to the authoritarian nature of Spanish colonial rule. For a somewhat Puritanical northern European like John Howison, Havana’s decay was a product of his xenophobic

imagination. However, the fact remained that Havana was blighted by narrow, filthy, badly paved streets, crowded housing, rampant illness, and high rates of crime. It was not a far stretch, then, to understand the cholera epidemic as simply a visual manifestation of the city's rotten inner core. The catastrophic bacteria eventually left the city looking like the "cadaver" that it actually was (Palma, *El cólera* 114).<sup>17</sup> Later, the distinction between *ser* versus *parecer* will apply as much to individual, biological bodies as it does to the urban body.

The colonial administration cautioned against drawing a direct correlation between the health of individuals and that of cities. The Habanese Oficina del Gobierno y Capitanía General at the time was struggling to generate patriotic loyalty to the Spanish crown among its Creole subjects. For them it made little sense to glorify northern Europe's purported social, cultural, and racial superiority. They felt that Europe was almost as plagued by these impurities as was Cuba itself. One colonial official in the Oficina del Gobierno hopes to dampen the Creole public's enthusiasm for the northern European industrial spirit. He fights the overwhelming tide of public opinion by asserting that individual morality cannot be generalized to equal urban health. The social deviance of certain groups of people, therefore, does not always lead to a sick city. The writer reports with feigned astonishment that Amsterdam, for instance, is one of the least choleric cities in Europe, despite being plagued by a "race" of barbarous deviants. Curiously, this race is described in terms almost identical to those used to define blacks. The port city is "infested," he elaborates, by Jews living in extreme "desaseo... andrajosos, con las barbas crecidas, amontonados en casas lóbregas y reducidas, pálidos, descarnados, mal alimentados y peor asistidos" (*Contestación* 347). Against all of his common sense, the writer discovers that the city of Amsterdam is as healthy and robust as a pure social body, while other, less racially heterogeneous cities—like Paris, London, or Hamburg—lie prostrate with the disease. In other words, racial deviance cannot be equated with the social deviance of the modern city as a whole.

This is but one of a multitude of examples from all sides of the colonial divide that chart the relationship between deceptive visual illness (*parecer*) and actual urban health (*ser*). In the perverse logic of racial purity, the race of an urban population did not necessarily signify ruin for the city. In short: "Puede un lugar *ser* saludable, con *apariencias* de enfermizo, y al contrario..." (*Contestación* 348) All in all, this optimistic concept left Havana with a glimpse of hope for its future. Even if its neighborhoods appeared contaminated, the city might not be close to total collapse after all. Appearances were deceptive. But implicit in this statement is a far more destabilizing thought: It is only that which lies beneath the surface that defines deviance or normality, illness or health. None but a carefully trained observer would know how to spot the telltale signs of disease on a given body. Later, this theory would have important implications for biomedically inspired texts.

### **Epidemic Catastrophe**

The Cuban cholera epidemic, though relatively short-lived, wreaked havoc on an urban population already riven by racial, socio-economic, and political anxieties. Cholera called forth people's worst fears about contagion, rampant death, and divine punishment. Despite its status as a mysteriously modern pandemic, cholera managed to reignite vague collective memories of the medieval plague, perhaps fittingly referred to as *la peste negra*. However, just like their counterparts in France, the fearful Habanese were likely to associate the epidemic with popular disturbances of the much more recent past. Increasingly, they linked cholera to the confusion, excess, and barbarism associated with popular revolution in their Caribbean neighborhood.

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<sup>17</sup> Ramón del Palma calls Havana "cadaverous" after the cholera epidemic in *El cólera en la Habana*, 114. See Chapter 3.

In Paris, the vicious cholera epidemic of 1832 had recalled the bloody revolutions of 1789 and especially 1830. Political cartoons depicted cholera as a masked executioner, hungry for revenge, who indiscriminately chopped off the heads of rich and poor alike (Kudlick, *Cholera* 42). By associating cholera with the guillotine, the French middle classes implicitly linked disease to France's revolutionary history and to the violent uprisings of the "dangerous classes." The poor, often recent arrivals from the pre-modern space of the countryside, represented an atavistic species ill-suited for life in the metropolis. One writer tried to placate his urban bourgeois readership by noting that criminality in Paris stemmed mainly from the displaced rural peasantry (Pierquin 154). It was incumbent upon city leaders to train this savage populace in the manners of modern life, educating its barbaric desires and reining in its excesses. Bringing cholera's chaos under medical and administrative control gave the nascent bourgeoisie an acceptable way to dominate its fear of the Other. For a brief period, it appeared to symbolize the end of a troubling history of revolutionary events and a welcome transition to modern, civilized culture.

Just as the cholera epidemic in France reminded bourgeois Parisians of the atavistic "race" of underclass "others" associated with revolutionary uprising, cholera in Cuba specifically recalled the Haitian Revolution of 1794-1801 as well as the local Aponte uprising of 1812. As people were reminded time and again, revolutionary Haiti was only ten leagues (about 150 miles) away from Cuba's eastern shore (Romay 221-25). In fact, many members of the Haitian Creole elite had sought refuge in what they thought would be a bucolic, sparsely populated eastern Cuba after the revolution. The industrial technicians of a collapsed plantation system also sought asylum in Havana, perhaps demonstrating that early nineteenth century Caribbean modernity could not accept radical antislavery movements such as the one in Haiti. Whether they admitted it or not, the bloody events and unspeakable trauma of the Haitian Revolution struck fear into the hearts of the Creole bourgeoisie. While in the popular imagination, the retrograde space of a black republic was clearly outside of civilization, "Haiti was both at an infinite distance and dangerously close" to its island neighbors (Fischer, *Modernity* 4). Haiti, affirms Adrián López-Denis, "inspired fears of pan-Caribbean contagion centered on the 'barbarous constitution' of African bodies" ("Disease" 79). The fear that these atavistic black "barbarians" would break and enter the civilized space of the walled modern metropolis echoed earlier French fears of displaced country folk flooding unchecked into Paris.<sup>18</sup> The boundary dividing the "anachronistic space" of rural life from the modern space of the city was obviously much more porous than city dwellers would wish (McClintock 40-2). In Cuba as in France, the bourgeois classes were anxious to curtail the excesses of the backwards, dangerous Africanized "foreigners" who hailed from beyond the imagined boundaries of civilization. However, Cuba faced a unique challenge in that its racialized "others" often managed to circulate freely, not only in the countryside, but also inside the commercial heart of its bustling modern metropolis. If the city walls were an attempt to spatially segregate the population, they did not achieve the desired effect. Any boundaries that the walls created were more successful on a symbolic than on a concrete or practical level.

Freed slaves and their descendants had long been subsisting and even thriving in Havana, both inside and outside the city walls. Once free, the vast majority of blacks moved to the city (Mena "No Common Folk" 102). Blacks and mulattos were fundamental to the city's status as a

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<sup>18</sup> Reverberations of this racial paranoia—and the discourse of contamination used to articulate it—can be found almost daily in any North American newspaper. Consider, for example, Arizona's 2010 immigration law SB1070 and the virulent reactions to the perceived influx of racialized outsiders. As Foucault might say, this pernicious discourse never dies, but rather mutates into new and ever-changing forms. See Stoler, *Race*.

culturally advanced metropolis. In fact, the city's economy depended on the services of such laborers as the artists, musicians, and craftsman that composed much of the free black and mulato population. While many lived *extramuros*, they most often conducted their business in the city center. This clouded the Euro-Creole vision of a racially cleansed national self-image. While some Creole intellectuals—like Saco—hoped to eventually abolish slavery in Cuba, they consistently refused to envision an island colored by free blacks. Even for the most progressive of reformers, it was a disturbing mental struggle to imagine the viability of such a racially hybrid nation. Yet it was also impossible to eliminate the “dirt” constitutive of Cuban modernity (Douglas 7). The solution to this conundrum appeared insurmountable. The contradictions between industrial Habanese modernity and plantation slavery, embodied by the free blacks inhabiting the city, led to a feeling of social paralysis. Saco, for example, worries that through racial contamination “nos exponemos a una paralización repentina” (*Colección* 88). However, for some among the ruling classes, this crisis also contained the seed of societal renewal. Revolution in the form of a cholera catastrophe would provide first disaster, yes, but then opportunity for the (white) Creole national imaginary. Perhaps most importantly of all, an epidemic disease supplied the medical vocabulary necessary to articulate the crucial social problems Cuba faced.

It is still common to speak of revolution in medical terms. Cubans displayed a variety of what Sibylle Fischer calls “virulent” responses to the epidemic of race revolt (*Modernity* 3). Cuban whites were desperate to distance themselves from the possibility of infection by the abolition movement in Haiti. In Fischer's astute terminology, they attempted to “disavow” mounting fears of popular revolution on their own soil. Just as in a medical epidemic, “a cordon sanitaire was drawn around the island [of Haiti] to interrupt the flow of information and people” (*Modernity* 4). To acknowledge the success of the Haitian Revolution or the trauma of the local Aponte rebellion would be to accept the power of these movements over the creole proto-national imaginary in Cuba. As their collective denial grew, so did the race phobia of the bourgeois classes. For the Euro-Creole intellectual plantocracy in particular, positioned precariously between the Spanish crown and the “colored” masses, the possibilities unleashed by the cholera epidemic were especially horrifying. One circulating rumor held that a boatload of enslaved blacks had introduced cholera to the island (Saco, *Colección* 250).<sup>19</sup> In general, epidemic signified the chaos and dread of a slave- or even a broader race-based revolt. The national symbolic system that the white-identified Creole elite was cautiously constructing would simply not accommodate the disastrous effects of popular internal rebellion. The discomfiting presence of an urban black population, like the bile internal to a cholera victim, provoked in Havana a disturbing sense of internal malaise.

For this reason, the unvoiced fears of a Cuba ripped asunder by race-based rebellion would not simply vanish. Just as cholera was said to feed of people's fear of contracting the disease, extremist race-contamination discourse fuelled by the Haitian Revolution continued to thrive off collective racial paranoia. Creole disavowal of Haiti's psychic mark moved like oil upon the flames of white racism. Over a relatively short period of time, news about the neighboring island mysteriously disappeared from the front pages of newspapers (*Modernity* 2). Yet no one doubted the Haitian Revolution's long-lasting significance. As if in obedience to the physical law of energy conservation, popular fear did not disappear; instead, it headed underground. Ideologies such as racism are multi-pronged, adaptable, and as pernicious as weeds. Racial terror, panic, and even hatred would resurface in myriad indirect and devious ways

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<sup>19</sup> This narrative is eerily similar to the one about how HIV/AIDS was introduced to the island.

for decades, even centuries, to come.<sup>20</sup>

### **Soiled upon Contact**

In tandem with the terrifying possibility that revolutionary ideas or leaders would infect Cuban soil, cholera provoked the fear of racial “mixing.” Public announcements of cholera outbreaks in various cities in Europe had already sparked popular riots, where angry mobs had stormed houses and broken barriers.<sup>21</sup> The disease seemed to incite people to transgress normative, civilized limits of acceptable behavior. One immediate fear was that the reining confusion and disorder would stimulate increased physical contact between classes and races, igniting societal turbulence and even miscegenation. For an incipient Euro-Creole nation, this possibility was even worse than it sounded. Unable to maintain proper racial boundaries, cholera would delight in mercilessly tossing together citizens of all colors and classes, destroying the viability of white hegemony. This paranoid narrative dexterously links national infection with literal mestizaje. Although the danger of racial mixing may have seemed minor compared to that of an all-out race revolution, it posed a more pernicious threat. Whites feared that hybridity could become as harmful to the national social body as they supposed it was to the individual.

Although racial mixing had been prevalent in Cuba since the beginning of the colonial era, fear of miscegenation reached panic level in the first three decades of the 1800s. This was due in large part to the rapid increase in importation of enslaved Africans to feed the island’s sugar boom. The social stigma attached to being visibly black or mulato was severe. At the same time, the percentage of the population that appeared racially ambiguous (“almost-white” or “white but not quite”<sup>22</sup>) was so large that nearly anyone could be suspected of having a racially impure background. Thus the racial purity of any Cuban-born Creole was suspect. According to one narrative, anyone who touched Caribbean soil was contaminated. Unlike cholera itself, the symptoms of racial degeneration were not necessarily visible on the affected body. As we will see in Chapter Two, diseased bodies do not always reveal their affliction to the untrained eye. Once again, cholera helps confirm the theory that *ser* cannot be equated with *parecer*.

One manifestation of the fear of racial mixing can be found in José Antonio Saco, the Creole historian, philosopher, and social commentator. A native of the rural eastern side of the island, Saco melded progressive intellectual ideals with rural social conservatism. He managed to successfully capitalize on the racial hatred of the white landowners, helping to spread racial paranoia throughout his white readership. For example, he declared his most fervent wish to be that Cuba prevent the number of blacks on the island from growing. At one point, he expresses his horror at the idea of importing free blacks to the island (*Supresión* 68). At another moment, he remarks, “Es asunto de vital interés para los habitantes de Cuba que el número de las personas de color no se aumente” (*Colección* 170). This is a concern of crucial importance to white Cuba’s racial health, whether as a colony or an independent nation. Saco’s writing exemplifies the Creole horror of race revolt inflected with a vocabulary of reproduction and miscegenation. In a missive aimed at reassuring the Spanish colonial authorities of his political and racial loyalty, he affirms, “Mi más ardiente deseo sería que los ricos campos de aquella preciosa colonia no se fecundaran con más sudor que el que corriera de frentes blancas y caras...”

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<sup>20</sup> The “viral” power of racism continues to use crises as opportunities to propagate itself. Consider Pat Robertson’s recent comment that the January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010 earthquake in Haiti was divine punishment for its pact with the devil (“Pat Robertson”). This may sound like outrageous vitriol, but it is merely one point along the spectrum of race-based paranoid fantasies.

<sup>21</sup> See Kudlick, “Learning” 1, and López-Denis, “Disease” 90, 190-91.

<sup>22</sup> See Bhabha’s “Of Mimicry and Man” in *The Location of Culture*.

(*Colección* 199). Saco betrays his terror of hybridity while perhaps<sup>23</sup> inadvertently reaffirming Cuba's dependence on the sweat of black slaves. Given that the island runs the risk of ruining any possible future through racial mixing—"no sólo para España, sino para la raza blanca y para el mundo civilizado"—he proposes a racial cleansing of Cuban soil: "limpiar a Cuba de la raza africana" (161, 231).<sup>24</sup> While Saco conceals his ultimate goal—independence—he adroitly manipulates white racial solidarity as a way to dispel colonial anxieties regarding Cuban self-determination. For both Spanish authorities and the alert Creole readers of his subtext, the presence of blacks on the island menaces to destroy Cuba's otherwise clean, civilized existence. Saco's solution invokes a moral and physical disinfection of the island's pathological elements.

Various groups of doctors, commentators, and government officials fought to interpret the origins and meaning of this catastrophic epidemic (Ramos, "Citizen" 1994). Heavily influenced by the debates raging in France, Cuban intellectuals subscribed to the most fashionable theories of the moment. Both the contagionists—those who believed that individual human bodies were responsible for the propagation of disease—and the anticontagionists—who thought that illness was caused by putrid miasmas in the environment—found ample justification for their theories. If individuals were at fault, felt the contagionists, then their unruly behavior could be reformed and monitored. This would provide a convenient justification for government intervention into the private lives of questionable citizens. If, on the other hand, environmental factors were to blame, entire neighborhoods needed to be purged of vice and filth. This would legitimize a timely cleansing of the diseased city. In the end, although contagionism largely won the discursive battle in Cuba, most agreed with already dominant biomedical narrative that disease favored the undisciplined bodies of the racialized poor.

### **Disaster as Opportunity**

Although cholera was undoubtedly a traumatic event for all Habanese, the catastrophe provided a unique opportunity for the colonial authorities to impose order and control over an increasingly unmanageable, socio-racially heterogeneous population. It also gave proto-nationalist Creoles the chance to help shape their concept of an ideal Cuban citizen. Since Creoles had a considerable influence over the local government, they were able to influence policy decisions.<sup>25</sup> The prevailing theory of physiological medicine, first proposed by the French doctor François Joseph Victor Broussais, provided the moral justification for public penetration into the lives of individuals. At the same time, the anticontagionist theory that miasmas favored the poorer neighborhoods allowed colonial officials to undertake massive urban reforms. In what we would now call "shock doctrine" techniques, authorities capitalized on the brief window of time and circumstance presented by the disaster (Klein 2). They scrambled to implement new regulations that would bring the entire population under increasingly rationalized—that is, racialized—control. Such reform could both curtail deviant behavior and encourage conformity. For the Spanish colonial authorities, this could be an opportunity to successfully suffocate white Creole self-determination as well as free black disturbances. For the Creole intellectuals, it was a time to reinforce their sovereignty over the free population of color, as well as define the white Creole body as self-disciplined and controlled. Much could be accomplished under the guise of diminishing the power of the epidemic, but it had to be done swiftly. Epidemic times create days

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<sup>23</sup> It is possible, of course, that Saco purposefully reasserts Cuba's dependence on blacks in order to alert his readers to the political threat that they presented. See López-Denis, "Saco, Sagra..."

<sup>24</sup> Decades later, when Creole intellectuals were brainstorming about what to do with the black population after abolition, Saco proposes the extreme alternative of sending all black Cubans back to Africa. See José A. Saco, *Colección póstuma*, Vol. 2.

<sup>25</sup> See López-Denis' 2007 dissertation work, Ch.s 4-5 for an analysis of Creole influence over local government.

of terror, confusion, disorder, and consternation (Calcagno, *Tratado* 45). Such catastrophe requires that the population submit itself to increased state control. One revealing commentary by a government official reminds us ominously that cholera “es una enfermedad que deja poco tiempo para deliberar” (*Recopilación* 13).

At a moment of crisis, power circulates with greater force than usual, and the effort to grasp it is correspondingly more greedy, more desperate, and more visible. Normally, those most ready to use discourse to locate the deviant elements of society are likely to be those already in power. As theorist Robert Nye implies, the ruling classes close ranks in order to consolidate their control (Nye 12). Disaster, however, often widens the cracks into which power flows, spreading opportunity further afield. Seizing an impeccable moment for disciplinary governance, Havana’s newly reinvigorated Junta de Sanidad (Superior Board of Public Health) ordered a special commission to inspect the cleanliness of people’s homes. Its injunctions were tinged with the racialized language of social deviance. In order to rid their houses of any trace of the dreaded miasma, upstanding city residents were ordered to whitewash (“dar lechada,” “blanquear”) their houses and streets. One hardly wonders about the continued racial association of these words.<sup>26</sup> *Sanidad*—which in the nineteenth century often connoted not only health, but also prudence or even sanity—naturally counseled good hygiene to the morally pure (white, male, Spanish) citizens, those whose complexions (*parecer*) were congruent with their character (*ser*). The Junta was most concerned about the more dubious morality of racially mixed groups, although its disciplinary tactics encompassed the entire population of the island, just in case. Members of the urban commission would visit individual houses to ensure strict adherence to the new sanitary codes. The Junta’s objective was twofold: the Peninsular members of the commission hoped to curtail potential threats to the colonial government, while both they and their Creole counterparts planned to scrutinize the social groups deemed most prone to deviance. Depending on one’s political loyalties, either the Creole bourgeoisie and/or the free black population threatened to disrupt the semblance of progress, order, and harmony that authorities were striving to project.

Documents charting the epidemic reality contain an ideological slippage in the terms used to describe the disease and its carriers. In many of the commentaries, letters, and articles devoted to the cause of the outbreak, Creoles and Spaniards alike link immorality to impurity to race. For all the ambiguities surrounding white class categories, their racial “others” were pointedly defined by vice, filth, poverty, and disease. So while some Europeans and Euro-Creoles might be anything but “acomodada” and “ilustrada,” they most certainly did not include the racialized members of “la clase ínfima, pobre,” those “individuos disolutos entregados á excesos en la comida y bebida...” (Calcagno, *Tratado* 55). The behaviors recommended by doctors and social commentators inevitably link the maintenance of ritual cleanliness to the demarcation of class and race boundaries. The Board of Health of the neighboring city of Matanzas, for instance, required that its neighborhood commissioners “...impidan y prohiban toda reunión de gente de color en las tabernas...” in their efforts to ward off the disease (*Recopilación* 12). This injunction mirrors José Antonio Saco’s earlier, less racially explicit recommendation that the government prohibit “toda reunión de un concurso numeroso...” in order to maintain the atmosphere “lo más pura que se pueda” (*Memoria* 119). One wonders of what the atmosphere needed to be purified. In an effort to solidify a white, middle-class identity, the Board of Health representative inclusively refers to all reasonable, rational members of the population: “si cuidamos que se observe el mayor aseo y policía...” He makes no effort to conceal his

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<sup>26</sup> Whitewashing was an activity dominated by the poorer, darker-skinned classes. The bourgeoisie, apparently, had no need to *blanquear*.

enthusiasm for such verbs as “vigilar,” “celar,” “observar,” “velar,” “precaver” (*Recopilación* 7-11). The expatriate Italian doctor Francisco Calcagno openly admonishes all enlightened citizens to “someterse gustoso a las disposiciones de las autoridades, y cooperar cada uno en la parte que le toca a su exacto cumplimiento” (*Tratado* 120). Thus, while the “imagined community” of white citizens interpellated by the Junta are recognized as “docile,” prudent, and *sano*, they are simultaneously encouraged to become neighborhood vigilantes, to supervise and control their racialized “others:” the *insanos*, the imp(r)udent, the rebellious.<sup>27</sup> When these recommendations came directly from Spanish Peninsular authorities, they were not only meant to discursively separate Creole whites from their black and mulato counterparts. They were also intended to rhetorically exhort the former to remain loyal subjects of the Spanish crown: to divide and conquer, so to speak.

### A Sick City<sup>28</sup>

It was not only the individual citizen that needed careful surveillance. The biomedical discourse on pollution and race shaped popular conceptions of the social body. According to the miasma or anticontagionist theory of disease, significant areas of the urban environment were corrupted by poverty, vice, and illness. This theory first resonated in Paris, where the medical world focused on the rehabilitation of a diseased urban milieu. Inhabitants deemed their city as internally imbalanced, as susceptible as a weak, unclean, or malnourished body to the onslaught of plague (Kudlick, *Cholera* 40). By this account, the ritual purification of individual homes—though necessary—was not in itself sufficient to extract the parasite, because disease was not merely spread via individual bodies. Rather, the city itself was threatened by impurities intrinsic to its social makeup. Kudlick uses the term “Paris malade” to refer to citizens’ belief in the pathology of the city: “[T]hey felt that “a complete and literal fusion of the diseased urban and human bodies had occurred” (38). Doctors and medical experts were convinced that some neighborhoods—Cuban “focos de infección” and Parisian “foyers of infection”—were preconditioned for illness.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the miasmatisers, though supportive of the individual cleansing of homes and buildings, preferred to focus on rehabilitating specific areas of the urban environment through the administrative monitoring of troublesome sectors of the population. According to Kudlick’s research, in the 1830s and ’40s French medical experts persisted in the belief that “putrid miasmas remained confined to the world of the poor” (*Cholera* 80). Just as disease lurked within the “predisposed” human body, the enemy was thought to dwell within the polluted flesh of the city itself. And although neighborhood contamination—like all forms of dirt—was relative, the social body as a whole was thought to suffer from disease (Douglas 35). For Kudlick, “the debate over contagionism [in France] revealed how and to what extent many problems in French society and culture were being conceptualized in medical terms” (*Cholera* 81). The concept of the *social body* had gained ascendance—at least in England and France—by the first half of the nineteenth century—the 1830s and ’40s. The biomedical metaphor of society as *sick body* came to dominate in the second half of the century, the era when industrial capitalism’s effects were finally being felt by the population at large.<sup>30</sup> But what became

<sup>27</sup> Today’s Comité de Defensa de la Revolución is eerily reminiscent of this kind of neighborhood surveillance.

<sup>28</sup> I am borrowing this term from Kudlick (1996), who in turn takes it from an 1832 play by Eugène Roch.

<sup>29</sup> See López-Denis, “Saco” 14, Kudlick, *Cholera* 31.

<sup>30</sup> While most historians agree that the Industrial Revolution is the most important even in human history, they cannot agree upon when it began to be perceived as such. Estimates range from 1760-1830 for England (T.S. Ashton), the 1830s and 40s (Eric Hobsbawm), to the mass production of the 1860s and beyond. In any case, I suggest, following C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, and Sidney Mintz, that modernity, including capitalist industrial “progress,” was never peripheral to the Caribbean, but rather that the latter was central to it. See *The Black Jacobins* 392, *Capitalism and Slavery* ix, and *Caribbean Transformations* 257, respectively.

pervasive in Europe by the mid-to-late 1800s was also present in Cuba as early as the 1830s. Thus one could say that these phenomena developed, not necessarily independently of each other, but at slightly different times and with distinct characteristics.

One of the principal theoreticians of the view of the social body was August Comte, the founder of positivism and an early proponent of the new field of “social physics,” or sociology. Comte was one of the first to examine the social body in biomedical terms. In his six-volume *Course on Positive Philosophy*, written between 1830 and 1842, he builds upon Adam Smith’s 1776 depiction of society as “the great body of the people,” a single, organic whole. Because it obeys the same natural laws as sciences such as biology, chemistry, and physics, society as an entity should be studied scientifically, by scientists, as a science. In his logic, the social body, as a creation of our collective human nature, is a physical extension of the individual human body. As such, it suffers the same illnesses that a person would. A weak or poorly governed social body is susceptible to pollution by “vices or evils,” including the “revolutionary contagion” that swept France in the latter part of the eighteenth century (176, 151). Specifically, Comte defines the “old order” of the *ancien régime* in France as a serious social “malady,” the “decay” of an ailing, decrepit body (141, 150). It suffered the “chronic epidemic” of corruption (169). To “cure” such a society, scientists must first reveal the “acute or chronic symptoms” of the disease (169, 177). The sick body can be “regenerated,” but only through a major reorganization of the political structure, which are the “organs” of the social body (240). Revolution in France provided the “salutary” shock necessary for the regeneration of the feminized, “effete” social body of the old regime (68).

In a similar manner, the shock of the cholera epidemic in Cuba worked as both disease and cure for the sick city. While it certainly terrorized the population, its possible benefits for the reordering of social body soon became clear. If health meant social control and corporal self-discipline, then a “health panic” provided a chance for reeducation and renewal of certain bodies. According to historian Sean Quinlan, health panics isolate and vilify the bodies considered incapable of such moral uplift. In this way, an orderly citizenry consolidates its “self” against an unruly “other.” As Julio Ramos reminds us,

Disaster is a constitutive variable in enlightenment’s figurative economy...calamity activates the antinomical articulations—culture and nature, civilization and barbarism, continuity and rupture—that interact in the teleological discourse of progress and modernity (“Citizen” 4).

As we shall see, some Creoles, such as José Antonio Saco, successfully capitalized on the collective sense of disaster created by the disease. Out of the ashes of choleric chaos, the phoenix of a new social order was born.

It is far too early in the century to invoke the evolutionary doctrine of biological decline or cultural decadence. That would come in the post-Darwin age of the late 1800s and proceed well into the twentieth century with works such as Oswald Spengler’s 1918 *Decline of the West*. However, the notion of degeneracy, already present in the eighteenth century with Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hegel, manifests itself in Comte’s account of the old regime in France. Although he focuses optimistically on the societal renewal that occurred organically after the Revolution, Comte implies that a new system such as the Republic cannot be born without the destruction of the old. In addition, when Comte remarks upon the frailty and decay of the *Ancien Régime*, he inevitably takes recourse to a gendered terminology. It seems impossible for him to

dissociate femininity from either sexual immaturity, on the one hand, or physical decrepitude, on the other. It may be premature to discuss the gender ideology surrounding the post-Enlightenment views of nineteenth century social bodies. Yet already, at the end of the eighteenth century, Comte associated the concept of ailing political body with a post-menopausal, spent, or worn out female body. This view would become prevalent along with late nineteenth century theories of decline (Aronna 11-33). However, the feminization of the social body can be located well before fin-de-siècle decadence. It is already present in nineteenth century Cuban discourse. At the same time, it does not necessarily follow that the new, regenerated body is a virile masculine one. Throughout the century, the underperforming, infertile, or degenerate social body will continue to be associated—obliquely or explicitly—with femininity.

Rather than wholeheartedly adopting northern European medical and social theories, Cuba participated in a circulation of modern discourse, producing some concepts and reinterpreting others. The metaphor of city as suffering physical body, for instance, had rooted itself in the Creole imagination even before the onslaught of cholera. Clearly, the metaphor was useful for a society plagued by issues of slavery, colonialism, racial terror, and rampant poverty. A prominent early example of the biomedicalization of the Cuban social body comes from medical aficionado José Antonio Saco. While the cholera epidemic raged in Europe, Saco identified himself as a prominent contagionist—a believer in the propagation of disease through contact. Despite his disagreement with prevailing French theory on cholera infection, Saco continued for decades to promote the metaphor dominant in France, that of a troubled society as a sick body. “Nos hallamos gravemente enfermos,” he writes of the Cuban social body in the 1840s; “si no aplicamos el remedio con mano firme, la muerte puede sorprendernos en medio de la aparente felicidad que gozamos” (*Colección* 77). Again, *ser* versus *parecer*: “we” may *appear* healthy, but appearances often deceive. For Saco, slavery itself is not the primary cause of the Cuban malady. Rather, it is the very presence of Afro-Creoles on Cuban soil that infects “us” Cubans. “Contact” is a euphemism for racial intermingling, and therefore the Cuban illness, according to Saco, is race. Despite its superficial material wealth, the body of Cuba remains “possessed” by the permanent scourge of the black “plague:” “una de las razas más rezagadas de la familia humana” (199).

Saco emphasizes the materiality of the social body, a discursive link that will be adopted by colonial administrators, doctors, and many others. For him, the material world is by nature predisposed to affliction and disease. Philosophers beginning with Descartes divided that which is physical—and by extension, unclean or impure—from the mental or the spiritual—the celestial and the pure. Centuries later, Freud locates materiality specifically on the lower half of the body, those parts aligned with base instincts, “dirty thoughts,” and the biological, earth-bound mandates of species reproduction. An inevitably sexualized and gendered concept, materiality is associated with the feminine form, procreation, blood, sweat, and urine, while elevated thought pertains to the realm of the masculinized, incorporeal, divinely inspired mind. For Saco and (male) thinkers like him, the social body is a natural extension of the human body. Both the social body and its principal manifestation, the city, are material entities bound to their physicality. The social body, as a biological entity, is naturally unclean or more specifically, at least according to Saco, diseased. It is up to the enlightened minds of white male Creole intellectuals like him to purify or cure it. Progressive thinkers like Saco, therefore, felt called upon to take charge of the situation, organizing and ordering the city so that it would be as wholesome, as clean, and as productive as possible. Since anything material is always already

bounded by its physical imperfections, the notion of a wholesome social body—especially in 1832— may seem contradictory. However, the eagerness with which reformers like Saco called for the regeneration of the city of Havana demonstrates their hopeful illusion that it could still be purged of impure members.

As we can see, Creole intellectuals like Saco were eager to dive into the project of social rehabilitation. According to Angel Rama, it was common for Latin American intellectuals to use urban planning as a vehicle for societal reform (5-20). A city planner was like the author of a book: he saw the limited space of the text as the perfect laboratory for controlled social experiments. However, the concrete reality of a city, unlike that of a text, could not be quite so easily manipulated. Once set in motion, the city took on a life of its own, one that was often at odds with the orderly urban entity cartographically imagined by scholars. Thus, Rama's "ciudad letrada"—the intellectualized vision of a corrected, proper symbolic urban order—did not always correct the flawed, concrete reality of the material world (11-36). While the "lettered city" strove to influence the "real city," the latter—along with its population—was too mired in daily survival to pay much heed to an abstract symbolic order. The theoretical double life of the Rama's urban center is nowhere more pertinent than in Havana, where racial tensions highlighted the dual nature of the city's everyday reality. In Havana, white Creole reality was fundamentally different from that of free blacks. Material Havana was nothing like city imagined by optimistic reformers such as Saco.

### **Somatic Integrity**

Cholera was only one manifestation of society's many ailments, and for Saco all were contagious. "Sucede con el cuerpo social lo mismo que con el humano, que cuando es robusto y bien constituido, puede preservarse por sí solo sin el socorro de la medicina; pero cuando es débil y achacoso, necesita de remedios para sacudir la enfermedad" (*Memoria* 114-15). In this early part of the nineteenth century, biomedically inclined intellectuals like Saco believed that society could be improved through the administration of targeted prescriptions. In his memorable *Memoria sobre la vagancia*, written in 1829, he addresses such "enfermedades morales" as drinking, gambling, excessive celebrations, and lack of appetite for work. Although these ailments favor those unfortunate members of the predisposed "clases inferiores," the entire social body is susceptible to disease. Cubans must assume a collective responsibility for society's problems, but it remains possible to improve its health. Saco equates "vagancia"—the laziness or sloth of the impoverished, vice-ridden "ociosos"—with the "profundas llagas que devoran [las] entrañas" of Cuba (119).<sup>31</sup> A manifestation of internal disease, "vagancia" eats away at the moral fabric of society, destroying its vital functions. Another of the vices he describes, that of gambling, is described literally as a "cáncer devorador" that "infects" the social body like the "plague" (30-44). Written before the onslaught of cholera in Europe, this text is visibly permeated by a discourse of pathology.

The preponderance of medical metaphors in Saco's work and in Comte's *Course on Positive Philosophy* suggests the broad resonance of the concept of biological interconnectedness between the natural sciences and the emerging field(s) of the social sciences. It also reminds us of the predominating influence of medicine over social constructions such as gender or race. In the first half of the nineteenth century, medical knowledge was used a tool for societal reform.

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<sup>31</sup> One cannot help but wonder if Saco, incendiary in his proto-nationalist stance, was motivated in his choice of title by the infamous myth of *vagancia española*. At the inception of the colony, the popular feeling in Cuba maintained that the Spaniards—as opposed to those hailing from other countries in Europe or elsewhere—were unwilling to work (Moreno Fragonals, *Cuba/España* 63).

The general view was that social problems had a medical cause, and vice versa; medicine provided a way to interpret social ills (Nye Ch. 3). Doctors had long played a central role in the construction of social classifications. Indeed, as early as 1684 it was a French medical doctor, François Bernier, who was the first to use skin color as a racial category (López-Denis, *Saco* 5). In Cuba as in France, doctors were respected as powerful social figures. On the other hand, intellectuals who would now be categorized as sociologists contributed heavily to the growing body of scientific wisdom. Saco, for one, felt himself to be as suitably prepared to “diagnose” societal ills as a medical doctor would be to diagnose the human body. Comte, for another, used biology to support his own social theories. He believed that the “social organism”—“a higher, more complex version of the individual organism”—was a literal piece of the enormous biological network of intertwined relationships encompassing the entire globe. All living beings were part of, and integral to, the pulsating body of this vast organism. Social progress inevitably followed biological laws of evolution, and the scientific method could and should be applied to all socio-political fields of study. Comte summarizes, “In a scientific view, this master-thought of universal social interconnection becomes the consequence and complement of a fundamental idea established, in our view of biology, as eminently proper to the study of living bodies” (*Cours* 224). As biomedical thought grew to dominate the social domain, it became increasingly common to conceive of social order and progress in terms of the illness or health of the social body. Indeed, even today, it is difficult to discuss urban and social problems without resorting to such metaphors.

Another type of socio-medical interconnectedness can be found in the conflation of terms for urban and social entities. If Adam Smith’s “great body of the people” apparently referred to nationalized populations, it is less clear whether the nineteenth century social body denotes society as a whole, or rather, a particular manifestation of that whole, such as a concrete city or state. Comte himself is not always clear on this matter. In his early work, following the Marquis de Condorcet, he views the distinct peoples or “races” of the earth as a single “nation” (*Cours* 227-28). However, he also calls Western Europe a “family of nations” (98). The more advanced, industrialized countries are analogous to the adult members of a family, while the colonies languish in prolonged childhood. Spain wins Comte’s approval, as she has done her part to increase the size of this family through her numerous colonies (93). In Comte’s view, Spain has initiated her offspring into the modern family through the inculcation of a particular set of metropolitan European values.<sup>32</sup> Although the “social organism” consists of the population of the entire planet, separate societies within that organism function as the constituent parts of a single international body. At other times, the city itself is the most direct manifestation of the social body. For bourgeois Parisians, their city was synonymous with their nation. When they complained about the inundation of peasants into the city, they represented these foreigners as hailing from a distinct nation. Likewise for the Creole elite, Havana literally was the *patria*, while Spain received the more dubious distinction of *madre patria*, a confusing term (Moreno Fragnals, *Cuba/España* 144). Their colonial capital was synecdoche for the incipient national body. Those who didn’t share the Cuban brand of patriotism were viewed suspiciously as outsiders, foreigners, or even traitors. At one point, Saco even proposes to expel these types from the island (*Memoria* 116).

When Saco speaks of “la Isla de Cuba” as a single unit, he cautiously but deliberately represents the proto-nation as a body independent of its Peninsular mother ship. In the *Memoria*, he laments the unhealthy state of the Cuban *cuervo social*, whose degenerate parts—internal to

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<sup>32</sup> In his definition of Western Europe, Comte magnanimously includes Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain.

the social geography of the island—contaminate the whole. The social body with which Saco identifies is Cuba, not colonial Spain. The deleterious situation in which Cuba finds herself is exacerbated when the parts of the body—different races and classes of people within Cuban society—become (con)fused together in a jumbled, unhygienic mess. Instead they need to be maintained in their naturally separate spheres. He sarcastically refers to Cuba’s “perfect democracy” in which all individuals “se hallan gustosamente confundidos” within one overcrowded physical space (*Memoria* 41-2). In the midst of this chaotic “mixing,” the component parts of the body are prevented from fulfilling their hygienically separate functions. One can only imagine the miscegenated progeny, literal and metaphorical, that might emerge from this chaos. The ineffective social body then wastes away to nothing; the national symbolic system languishes in disuse. Clearly, something must be done to remedy such disorder, and modern medical wisdom was prepared for the task. Saco takes this opportunity to make the most of epidemic disaster through a biologized plan for renewal and reform.

According to Saco’s melioristic medical ideology, the ill social body requires a precise and immediate remedy. He somewhat reluctantly admits that the treatment must begin with a “revolution” of Cuban customs, a violent shaking-up of the old order (*Memoria* 36). Following the somatic metaphor, he also suggests a surgical solution, an amputation of the gangrened limbs: “...pues como miembros corrompidos, deben cortarse para que no infecten el cuerpo social.”<sup>33</sup> After the initial, wholesome “sacudido,” the delicate social body requires medicalized regulation and control by *las autoridades*, beginning with the heads of family (*Memoria* 35-8). (Clearly, Saco is attempting to ingratiate himself with the Peninsular *autoridades*.) Saco calls for order, segregation, isolation, and repression of the infected areas of the social body. Cuba’s inner defect could be remedied, but only with the most stringent and immediate set of reforms. Cholera, like a revolution of the existing social system, proved to be one of the answers to Saco’s call for a rehabilitation of the social organism. But Saco was far from its only proponent. Other leaders benefited from the chaos surrounding the epidemic. Although they initially hoped to avoid social upheaval, they reluctantly agreed that progress inevitably required a disturbing break from the past. Disease might provide just that; it turned out that cholera engendered its own cure. As Julio Ramos remarks, “Illness was established as the privileged object of discourse on social reform” (“Citizen” 4). Comte would agree that cholera in particular provided the shock necessary at that precise moment for the establishment of a new order of physical discipline and control. A regime change for the social body was yet another salutary transformation. However, because this new order was generated by a representative of the Spanish government, it may not have been quite what the proto-nationalist Saco had envisioned.

### **The Modernization of the Social Body**

The massive urban reforms of the colonial governor Miguel Tacón (1834-38) capitalized on the association between disaster-shocked urban capital and revitalized physical body. In conflating these entities, Tacón naturalized the connection between somatic cleanliness and administrative order, between urban hygiene and social discipline. For Tacón, the Spanish government should manifest its political power through a moral and physical realignment of the urban body of its daughter colony. Reform, in turn, would facilitate heightened and increasingly visible state surveillance. In his study of Tacón’s reconstitution of Havana, historian Carlos Venegas Fornias emphasizes the feminized corporeal: “Su objetivo político y social era la *apropiación del cuerpo* de la ciudad... a través de obras de mejoramiento que revelaran en gran

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<sup>33</sup> Saco, *Memoria sobre la vagancia* 33; see also López-Denis, *Saco* 14.

escala las ventajas de la disciplina social” (Venegas Fornias 22) (my emphasis). Tacón, apparently, was optimistic about the possibilities for purifying Cuba of its social diseases. Political and social control of the island could be achieved by seizing the urban body from the clutches of a suspiciously heterogeneous Creole body—of which Saco was a principal member—and transforming the city into a visual reminder of imperial power.

At the end of his tenure, Tacón uses a socio-medical vocabulary to contrast the state of the city upon his arrival in Havana in 1834 with its cleansed, orderly state four years later:

Las plazas de mercado eran un hacinamiento de escombros y de basura; las calles un depósito de inmundicia... [había] absoluta falta de policía...se encontraba reunido un número considerable de vagos y gente disipada, que se entregaba a...cometer [toda] clase de excesos. Todo conspiraba a fomentar la ociosidad, y a formar de los individuos de la sociedad miembros perjudiciales y corrompidos (6).

Vagrancy, waste, slothfulness, excess, “falta de policía:” these are the vices that create gangrenous “members” or limbs of society’s ailing body. In his view, Tacón had fulfilled his patriotic duty of curing the most valuable member of Spain’s colonial body. He had implemented a series of extractions, additions, incisions, and stitches to transform Havana—the principal manifestation of Spain’s Cuban extremity— into one of the most robust urban bodies of its time. He had straightened the twisted limbs, unblocked the clogged arteries, and insured that pure blood flowed freely through the revitalized veins of the city.

Saco had used much the same language in his own earlier call for reform. In his *Memoria*, he complains of over-crowding, dirt, and decay of specific areas of the city. However, his emphasis is notably different from that of Tacón. He implies that the Cuban social body will cure itself internally, purging itself of its degenerate elements and renewing its constituent parts. Instead, the Peninsular Spanish government steps in and effectively claims the urban renewal project as its own. Although it could be said that Saco and Tacón shared a common enemy—the excess and disorder of the “ociosos” or vagrants—Tacón’s method of imposing this *disciplina social* was meant to suffocate any Cuban attempts to remedy its own illness. In effect, Tacón’s regeneration of the city was a brutal reminder of the fact that Spain, not Cuba, remained the head of the social body, the parent of the national family. Tacón sent the message that if Cubans hoped to be recognized as legitimate, healthy members of an organic whole, they must not only respect their constituent place among the Spanish family, but also—like wayward, immature children—concede their need for extra instruction, discipline, and care. For Creoles like Saco, this care was beginning to feel externally imposed and blatantly authoritarian, rather than self-initiated and internally managed. As punishment for his overt criticisms of the colonial government, Saco was punished with exile to the city of Trinidad in 1834 for what was euphemistically described as his “muchu influencia sobre la juventud habanera” (Sosnowski 95).

According to Venegas Fornias, Tacón’s principle objective in reconstituting Havana was to “lograr un mensaje simbólico de autoridad con el adecentamiento...de una serie de funciones sociales...” (23). For Tacón, the authority was Spain. All material advancements enjoyed by Havana would be physical manifestations of “el buen gobierno y progreso de la colonia al amparo de su Metrópoli” (23). His emphasis on the order and decency of social institutions echoes the language used to describe the ideal (white, Spanish) physical body. Both required proper attention to “order,” “decorum,” and hygiene. Sharply aligned buildings would strengthen the moral and physical integrity of the city. Separation of the races and classes would avoid such

plagues as “hacinamiento” and (con)fused (ie: miscegenationist) “democracia.” Tacón’s wording also reiterates Comte’s organic connection between urban body, social body, and human body. In focusing his efforts around three central axes of the city, Tacón emphasized the need for proper circulation of traffic. Just as a physical body requires blood to flow to the extremities, large avenues would serve as the city’s main “arteries.” Three broad boulevards provided the backbone for this renewal project, lending the structure and cohesion of “vertebrae” to the city center and linking each limb of the urban body (Venegas Fornias 23). Revitalizing Havana would restore vitality to Cuba, the *primogénito* of the Spanish family.

In fact, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the child briefly surpassed the parent. Before the end of the decade, the Cuban capital had undergone rapid modernization, such that it became more socially and technologically advanced than its metropolitan parent. Not only had Havana reorganized its garbage disposal, sewage, and French-styled *macadam* street paving well before its metropolitan counterparts (López-Denis, “Disease” 152). It had also constructed a brand new theater and a state-of-the-art prison. While we cannot dispute that these served as a bold visual reminder of colonial control, the frenzy with which the Spanish government in Havana scrambled to implement such changes betrays the extent to which it feared the loss of control over the most precious of its colonial offspring. These changes were also part of a larger process that caused Havana to temporarily overtake Madrid in the forward march of industrial progress. For instance, in opposition to imperial designs, the Creole elite had countered with modern reforms of their own, including a set of aqueducts and an efficient railway system that connected the capital to its sugar plantations. This railway went into use in 1838, ten years before its Spanish Peninsular equivalent (Moreno Friginals, *Cuba/España* 225).

Spain’s lack of technological resources compared to its colony not only caused a profound erosion of political relationships between the two entities, but also led to an overriding sentiment of Cuban economic triumph over Spain (*Cuba/España* 173).<sup>34</sup> As the Cuban socio-political body began to show early signs of severing itself from its parent nation, its ideological alignment with the Enlightenment model provided by northern and western Europe became increasingly visible. Moreno Friginals, in his eulogistic history of the island, observes that Cuba in these years “incluso se adelantará a muchos países europeos” in terms of industrialization and social reform. Cuba accepted, for instance, “las líneas positivistas del saber rentable,” the profit-generating modern knowledge of England and France (*Cuba/España* 172). It rejected the virulently anticapitalist presence of the Spanish crown and the old colonial semi-feudal system of government that it represented (235). Whether Cuba was in fact one of the cradles of technological or scientific modernity for Europe is tangential to this discussion.<sup>35</sup> It does, however, make more sense to compare the economic/capitalist Cuba of this era to northern and western European industrial vigor than to its own imperial metropolis on the Continent.

Thus, the initial disaster of the cholera epidemic proved to have a silver lining for the Creole elite: it hastened the vast industrial and intellectual advancements centered on Havana in the 1830s. López-Denis argues that cholera “contributed to the acceleration of this process of social transformation and conditioned its concrete outcomes” (“Disease” 152). On the one hand, the plague had provided the perfect justification for the imperial administration to tighten its control over its most valuable and unruly colony. On the other, the colony had responded by

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<sup>34</sup> Moreno Friginals clearly enjoys waxing lyrical about the bourgeois tendencies of the Creole elite of this era. In economics terms, he claims, “*Cuba no era una colonia*” (187) and “*la Isla quedaba fuera de la órbita de España*” (235-36). His enthusiasm for their idea of progress is matched only by his disdain for Spain’s industrial deficiencies. The Iberian Peninsula is defined by inherent *carencias españolas*, economic failures, and medieval traditions. Any racial divisions plaguing Cuba are overlooked in the act of praising the island’s modern advancements.

<sup>35</sup> See Cañizares-Esguerra, especially Ch.1.

accelerating a variety of modernizations of its own. Specifically, cholera had stimulated the Euro-Creole bourgeoisie to compete with its metropolis in the rehabilitation and beautification of its capital city. In addition, cholera had provided the same elite with an opportunity to demarcate the socio-racial boundaries of a proto-national imaginary. It had brought to the forefront a crucial set of metaphors regarding the health and purity of the citizen body. Both Spanish and Creole elites took a melioristic view of this body social and by extension, of the collective human condition. In this early part of the nineteenth century, it seemed that a better world was possible through progress linked with scientific knowledge and rigorous social control.

Not all historians would agree that General Tacón's urban reforms were an unmitigated success. If the objective of Tacón's social cleansing campaign was to physically separate the races, his failure was spectacular. He might well have instilled in the general population a "healthy" fear of colonial authority, but he certainly did not succeed at creating the order he had imagined (Tacón 8). Luz Mena, in her 2001 study of the city's transformation, suggests that, in addition to revealing a previously latent series of architectural "mixtures and contrasts," within the city, Tacón's reforms merely stimulated the daily encounters between blacks and whites ("No Common Folk" 97). For instance, men and women of varying races and social classes frequently crossed paths in the midst of traffic, in the marketplaces, or at public events such as cockfights (99). One example of an altogether failed attempt at racial segregation can be found in the construction of the national theater building. Despite Tacón's elaborate plans for racially demarcated theater seats and boxes, the majority of the population never developed a taste for opera at all. Instead, they maintained their former, supposedly low-class preference for street fairs. If Tacón had meant to civilize and bring symbolic order to the populace through elite forms of entertainment like the opera, the people reacted by persisting in the "immoral behavior" of popular festivals.<sup>36</sup> Although his reforms may have visually and spatially altered the city, the people continued to circulate freely within their newly altered setting. The anxieties produced by such an unmanageable population cannot be underestimated.

The principal discursive offspring of the modernizing reforms was a new vocabulary regarding the management and containment of society's deviant elements. If the social body had been temporarily purged and purified of its most dysfunctional members, it still required constant discipline and care. Indeed, society as physical body could never be fully purified. The different domains of the social body—moral, physical, political—cried out for proper, and constant, policing. As López-Denis summarizes, "The normalizing discourse of public hygiene and the imperative of personal cleanliness were merged within a totalizing metaphor of order" ("Disease" 205). López-Denis is most concerned with what Julio Ramos, following Foucault, calls the "medico-administrative articulations" of colonial authorities ("Citizen" 180-85). I am interested in the broader manifestations of surveillance, normalization, and punishment. After the cholera epidemic, "government strategies acquired a double sanitary and disciplinary intent, legitimized from within the medical profession" ("Disease" 205). However, administrators and medical doctors were not the only ones concerned with the concept of moral hygiene.

### **Conclusion: The Long Half-Life of Disease**

The urban reforms of General Tacón are only the most architecturally visible manifestations of the epidemic's aftermath. Other, less direct examples of sanitation's discursive half-life pop up in other domains, such as prison reform (Ramos, "Citizen" 195). In 1832, the colonial governor Ricafort explicitly links the spread of cholera to the need for racial and gender

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<sup>36</sup> See Tacón 1, Mena, "No Common Folk" 100.

segregation in Havana's prisons.<sup>37</sup> The vicious black murderer would mix indiscriminately with the educated white person, causing the latter to become polluted by the evils of the criminal. The very air of the prison itself was contaminated by the "miasmatic" vices of localized deviance. Prison, therefore, was another perversely "democratic" setting wherein races and classes could be confused in an intolerable, ungovernable amalgam. For Governor Ricafort as for Saco, race mixing is equivalent to collective moral and social degeneration, disease and pollution.

Hygiene plays a starring role not only in public safety, but also in the more intimate, domestic setting of the home, the cradle of the social body. A principle arena wherein dangerous and unsanitary mixing could occur was in the relationship between unhygienic black bodies of slaves and their white owners. In ladies' journals such as "La Moda, o Recreo Semanal del Bello Sexo," bourgeois mothers were taught to educate their creole offspring to maintain physical distance from black house slaves. While Euro-creoles depended heavily on domestic service rendered by female nurses and housekeepers, these women held a significant amount of social power over white children, not to mention a particular allure for white men. Race-based anxiety crystallized around the wet nurse, whose milk was thought to contaminate and "blacken" the children whom she nourished. These "negritas," associated with "voluptuosidad" and "excesos venéreos," were thought to corrupt both their innocent charges and contaminate any white male onlookers (Le Riverend, *Memoria* 77). Cuban doctors and writers produced a multitude of documents condemning the practice of wet nursing. More generally, they berated the presence of black women inside white households. However, because it was not socially and economically viable to separate black slaves from white families, such advice was generally relegated to an emphasis on the precepts of hygiene. Socio-medical texts walk a delicate line between condoning and condemning somatic "mixing." They preach against the mingling of visually differing races through the exchange of various bodily fluids such as milk or semen. However, these texts also feel the need to encourage a certain amount of racial crossing *between* families of purely European origin. According to white doctors, Spanish-creole families have a civic duty to "perpetuate the race," to maintain the enviable "sangre azul y sin mezcla" (*Memoria* 79). Yet obsessive endogamy can be just as damaging as unlimited mixing. Ingestion of a black woman's milk in infancy was no more detrimental to the "species" than puritanical inbreeding. Both would cause the degeneration and decline of the white race. Of primary concern to all was the preservation of social, racial, and class purity of Spanish lineage, Spanish language (which blacks were thought to "contaminate" with their improper speech) and Euro-creole customs.

Contamination and disease—and cholera in particular—also became a metaphor for other social problems. For example, in 1857, the social commentator Gaspar Hernández denounced excessive ambition as the "cólera social" par excellence. His text demonstrates a common slippage between "acciones negras," perversity, and disease:

ha estado, está, y estará la sociedad padeciendo una enfermedad, o peste mortal, que la ha desolado...una dolencia que envilece, que destruye, que aniquila...y que matando a la sociedad moralmente causa males mayores que el cólera temporal (101, 91).

Just as medical cholera destroyed the *sano físico* of the social body, "social" cholera destroyed its *sana moral*. Hernández links the vice of immoderate ambition with crime, impurity, perversity, and degeneration. Once again, all excess and abnormality is associated with the deviant social characters who embody these behavioral pathologies. Through socio-medical

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<sup>37</sup> See Ramos, "Citizen" Note 12.

documents such as this one, disease became a signifier for the disorder, disruption, and dysfunction of society's expected norms.

Cholera's long arms extended far beyond the crucial decade of the 1830s. Thanks in part to the epidemic, the reconfiguration of not only the urban center but also the larger Cuban social body could now be explained in biomedical terms. Just as certain neighborhoods of Havana were imagined as sites of pathology, specific sectors of the population were also conceptualized as naturally abnormal, unhealthy, unscrupulous. An early study linked race to dementia, criminality, and insanity, but deviant bodies underwent increasing pathologization throughout the century.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, over the course of the long nineteenth century, implicit public support of medical theory expands enormously.<sup>39</sup> Scientific knowledge garners social prestige. The emerging field of public health legitimized power's desire to scrutinize and manage bodies social, political, and individual. Occurring at a turning point in the history of science, the cholera epidemic gives rise to what I will call a "contamination narrative," a discourse that infects multiple ways of thinking and writing. From the medical texts and social commentaries written directly about disease in the immediate wake of the outbreak, to cholera's shadowy presence in written works throughout the century, discourses on purity, sanitation, and contagion, and disease continued to carry a heavy symbolic power.

Michel Foucault charts how, from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, medical discourse consolidates itself and morphs into a broader social discourse. He sees medical knowledge, just like any other kind of knowledge, as a form of cultural, social, and political domination. On the one hand, medicine itself gains enormous prestige through standardization and professionalization. On the other, various "experts"—from doctors to administrators, teachers, writers—become endowed with the biomedical authority to locate pathologies of the body or mind. The population or social body as a whole is reconstructed as the object of clinical investigation. Foucault explores the idea that a "medical consciousness" permeates a multitude of domains, such that medicine itself becomes a political and social discourse (*Clinic* 26). From the field of public health, it leaps across traditional boundaries to political, moral, and physical domains. Medical consciousness begins to function as a policing mechanism, categorizing and supervising individuals and types. Certain sectors of the population are deemed normal and acceptable, while others—blacks, women, slaves, the poor—are viewed as "naturally" unhealthy, medically deviant or evolutionarily retrograde. These latter, like the rural peasants in Paris or the Afro-Creoles in Havana, were deemed to exist outside of healthy, modern, civilized life. The new medical consciousness sanctioned the cultural construction of marginalized subjects in biomedical terms, lending prestige and authority to these social categorizations. The outbreak of cholera provides an opportunity for this medical consciousness to spread, insinuating itself into the private lives of individuals, bodies, and practices. Power uses crises such as these to distribute itself more effectively and more completely.

The vocabulary of contamination and its counterpart, sanitation, form a powerful discursive net around complex race, class, and gender issues plaguing Cuba. Hygiene, a medicalized term which functions as a sort of demographic border patrol, guards and sustains the alarmingly porous boundaries between a multiply divided population. At the same time, it traverses social domains to become what Julio Ramos, following Lyotard, calls the "master-narrative" for Cuban modernity ("Citizen" 187). As a form of discourse, it gives birth to a type of power that, like the cholera bacteria, circulates invisibly through the social body. In this case,

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Archimedes, Bernheimer, Gallagher and Laqueur, Gilman, Corbin, Lombroso, Pierquin, or Russett.

<sup>39</sup> See Robert Nye's *Crime, Madness, and Politics*.

hygiene comes to signify that which is unique—and uniquely troubling—about the multi-racial social body of the incipient Cuban nation. Far from tapering off, this fluid and multi-directional discourse mutates into new forms, spilling over into new domains and new territories. It soon reappears under a new guise in novels, essays, and poetry. Literary texts mirror and expand upon the work begun by the Junta de Sanidad, the doctors, the scholars, and the social commentators. They help to popularize biomedical discourse and subtly encourage conformity to public health norms. The novel is one genre that makes scientific and medical texts accessible, palatable, and even entertaining to the nascent bourgeoisie who must internalize its lessons. But the novel does not merely follow the path laid out for it by other, non-fictional discourses. Just like the colony itself, the nineteenth century Cuban novel serves as a workshop for the creation of new discourses that will reappear, later in the century, in other forms and in other places. The novel addresses issues of nature, evolution, and degeneration before these have been fully articulated in non-fictional spheres. It participates in the formation and propagation of other, more violently medicalized narratives about the social body.

The novel witnesses the social conflicts that cholera stirred up. Through the interpellation of proto-national Cuban subjects, it attempts to reinforce porous social boundaries that the disease threatened to tear apart. It helps to establish visible differences between what I call “hygienic citizens” and their illegitimate, immoral, racialized counterparts. At the same time, it encourages conformity by disseminating bourgeois values through a newly (re)forming society. Without being blatantly coercive, the novel creates out of its readership a collective identity of normalized subjects. D.A. Miller argues that the novel functions as a discreet mechanism of social discipline. In *The Novel and the Police*, he theorizes that nineteenth century European (English and French) novels exercise surveillance over the private space of the modern bourgeois home. For Miller, the novel as a policing mechanism is meant to help mold the reader into a proper, modern subject of her (or more normally “his”) nation. This ideal subject is “proper” in the sense that he has no need to transgress boundaries to know and conform to his appropriate place in society; the novel models this norm for him. He is also proper in that he is correct, tidy, *propre*, hygienic: in short, an exemplary member of the wholesome and cohesive social body. To what extent such a European model can apply to the early Cuban novel is a question for another discussion.

For Miller, the novel reader is typically a housebound middle class female; the Cuban texts that I will discuss passed primarily through the hands of a small elite circle of highly educated male readers. The texts I examine have not achieved the formal maturity of the novels Miller studies; my chosen novels merely begin to archive, rather than actively censure and repress, the abnormalization of certain character types or members of the social body. However, they are no less important to study. I follow Miller’s argument that many nineteenth century novels help build medical consciousness and social control because they are primarily interested in tracing, if not manipulating, the contact between individual bodies and among distinct parts of the body social. While Miller theorizes the novel’s “entanglement...in a general economy of policing power,” I suggest that what he calls its policing function is present in other places, at other times, in less canonical novels. While both sets of texts—mine and Miller’s—explore what he would call delinquency and the well-known/established institutions that either discourage or participate in it,<sup>40</sup> I examine the more subtle—but no less powerful—policing presence in a society that has barely begun to form these institutions. In my study, the concept of “nation” is much less sturdy but disciplinary technologies are no less present. In fact, I want to suggest that

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<sup>40</sup> This list includes the prison, the school, the factory, the army barracks, and the hospital.

the rise of regulation is perhaps more visible in a setting where the social body is less established. These novels witness the birth pangs of a country where disciplinary power is still rough around the edges. It visibly manifests itself in texts that struggle to theorize and impose a narrative on disease and the social body.

Within a decade after the 1833 epidemic, a series of Cuban novels popularized the use of cholera as a plot source.<sup>41</sup> Many of these stories become vehicles for lessons about propriety, responsibility, and righteousness. They use the tragedy of the plague as a teachable moment for those wishing to be hygienic citizens, who can learn by example how to act. In these novels, the specter of disease looms in the background as a consequence for inappropriate behavior. The implied reader learns that health, happiness, and proper reproduction can be achieved through voluntary submission to normalizing laws. The novel is optimistic about its potential to consolidate the reforms begun by health officials. It shrinks the problem of policing down to an personalized level, concentrating on the potential for individuals to change their errant ways. In the chapters that follow, I explore the novel as both a laboratory and a vehicle for medical discourse.

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Ramón de Palma's *El cólera en la Habana* (1838), Anselmo Suárez's *Carlota Valdés* (1838), and José González del Valle's *Amar y morir* (1838) and *Carmen y Adela* (1838).

## Chapter Two, “Disease Represented”

### Introduction: Fictional Truths

In real<sup>1</sup> life, cholera’s rampage showed that it had no rhyme or reason, and people from all social and racial classes died of the disease. Contrary to the narrative propagated at the onset of the epidemic, cholera did not “only” attack people of color, the poor or the unkempt, the “vagrants,” the *coartados*,<sup>2</sup> the ex-slaves. The wealthy, the white, the educated, and the beautiful also perished. The discourse of public hygiene, as advanced as it was for its time, failed to fully explain why this was so. Narrative prose fiction stepped in to provide a useful supplement. Running parallel to the dominant discourse of social medicine, then, fiction instituted another, secondary discourse. If it meant to cover for the inadequacies of medical science, it also established a complementary yet competing form of truth. It closed the gaps in the incomplete universe of disease etiology, filling these interpretative holes in myriad ways, in the same fashion as would a reader with a literary text. In other words, each fictional narrative is one interpretation among many others; one writer’s way of “reading” the world. As Edward Said remarks, narrative prose fiction demonstrates an individual but also nearly universal<sup>3</sup> “human urge to add to reality” (*Beginnings* 82). The novel manifests this compelling urge but may never fully satisfy the itch, because, as Said convincingly states, fiction is “a kind of appetite that writers develop for modifying reality—as if from the beginning—as a desire to create a new or beginning fictional entity” (82). This chapter will explore the invented reality of the novel and its relationship to desire in 1830s Cuba.

While mimicking, falsifying, or supplanting reality on the one hand, novels also “create another sense [of reality] altogether” (*Beginnings* 87). A writer who engenders a fictional narrative has relative liberty to represent the Self and the Other, or health and illness, as s/he<sup>4</sup> desires. (I say “relative” because this liberty is an illusion, and, as we will see, it is short-lived.) The author of a narrative about cholera can freely choose the disease’s victims, while still maintaining what Kierkegaard calls a “dialectical” relationship to the truth (*Beginnings* 87). While taking the seemingly magnanimous position that no one deserves to die, a narrative version of the cholera epidemic also creates its own truth, albeit one that exists only within the universe of that particular novel. It does this by provoking rhetorical questions about why some subjects die while others survive. At the end of the novel, the reader should ask, Might there be a logic behind this enigma? Silent questions such as this one are meant to guide the reader’s interpretation of the text.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the full truth in the novel is contingent<sup>6</sup> upon a willing receiver or reader, who, through intimate contact with the text, fills in the lacunae in human understanding. Fiction is the “whole” that one’s imagination produces (Costa Lima 47).

Fiction attempts to deliver an imagined justice, an “illusory assumption of reality” that material or “scientific” reality cannot (*Beginnings* 137). It tries to impose a form of truth upon its created world and then attempts sustain that truth at all costs. However, as one perspective on reality among many others, the novel(ist), too, is constrained by a lack of ultimate authority—scientific or otherwise. While narrative, as Hayden White shows, is intricately linked to

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<sup>1</sup> By “real” life, I mean the everyday lived reality of the Habanese people, as opposed to the invented, fictional reality of the novel.

<sup>2</sup> Slaves who have managed to buy their freedom through installments.

<sup>3</sup> According to Said, narrative prose fiction reflects the ethos of the Christian West, and are not common in Islamic literary tradition (81-2).

<sup>4</sup> In all the novels I analyze, the author and the narrator are male voices, so I will generally use the male pronouns.

<sup>5</sup> See Iser, *Prospecting*, Part 1, Ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Contingent*, in this case, means that the novel’s meaning is dependent on the reader; its truth is not necessarily or universally true, not true on its own. *Contingent*, incidentally, comes from the same Latin root (*contingere*) as the word *contact*. See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

questions of “laws, legality, legitimacy and authority,” novelistic authority is “never final” (White 17, *Beginnings* 84). Even if the writer starts out with a strong initial conviction of himself as author, he may find, through writing, that, the notion of “self” is also a fiction. As Nietzsche might say, the subject without action would not “be” anything (*Genealogy* Ch. 1 Sec. 13). In other words, it is the action—in this case, that of writing—that makes the subject. This is not to say that the self is not real, but rather that the self of the author as well as the selves of the characters—to say nothing of that of the reader—are actively produced during the creative or active process (of writing, reading, doing).

For Said as for Kierkegaard, this frustrating lack of authority or authenticity is due to the fact that writing is always secondary to the materiality of scientific (or for that matter religious) truth. Jeremy Bentham wrote in the 1814 that fiction stems from the fact that we (subjects) have to use language to discuss what we see; thus all (that which must be represented in) language is a fiction (Costa Lima 35). Written language is always a supplement to the material reality that it imitates, expands upon, and then interprets. The “confident edifice” that writing constructs is more like a façade that never fully replaces the (always already absent) original, whether that be the word of god or God, a scientific truth, or the pre-verbal unity of the self (*Beginnings* 137). Thus the writer’s “appetite” to create, in fiction, the reality of a completed, whole being is never fully satiated. The author, unfortunately, has set himself up for failure. In addition, what Said aptly terms the subject’s “desire” to create anew is not without consequences: writing has a way of expanding its hunger for more. Said claims that fiction writers always accept the consequences of that desire (82). However, this yearning does not simply disappear, but rather it spreads and expands.

The fiction that I will examine here presents itself as a realistic history of social reality of Havana in crisis. It uses cholera as a signifier of the deviance and desire that it attempts to tame. As this chapter will show, the novel is not simply a remedy for these metaphoric diseases. Through its contact with fictionalized disease, it produces and exacerbates the trouble that it attempts to solve. The following is just one of several coeval Cuban novels in which disease represents all that is secret and unknowable about the lives of problematic, unmanageable subjects.<sup>7</sup> Fictionalized illness becomes a way for the author to come close to indecipherable truths about im/purity, Self/Other, and subject/object, that medical science cannot grasp. Disease is also a metaphor for (the cause, the act, and the effect of) writing itself. In narrative prose fiction of 1830s Cuba, the transformative crisis of the cholera epidemic is the axis around which individual selves and collective histories turn.

### **Cholera, Contact, and Deviant Desire**

In reflecting on literary representations of disease and contagion, the short fiction of the 1830s stands out. One particular novel that is remarkable for its intense focus on the friendship of two young Euro-Creole girls in the midst of cholera’s rampage. In *Carmen y Adela* (written in 1838 but not published until 1895), the author attempts to generate objective truth about disease, hygiene, and morality. Yet the realist form<sup>8</sup> of narrative that he chooses to represent his position undermines the credibility of such truth. This is due to the fact that the mediator in this process, embodied in a narrator who is immersed in the life of the story, is more than a neutral chronicler of social events. One could say that his own subjectivity encroaches upon his authority as a

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ramón de Palma’s *El cólera en la Habana* (1838), Anselmo Suárez’s *Carlota Valdés* (1838), and José Zacarías González del Valle’s *Amar y morir* (1838).

<sup>8</sup> Formal realism is Ian Watt’s term for “[t]he narrative method whereby the novel embodies [a] circumstantial view of life” (32). Though this story is too early to be called “realist” per se, I am following Watt’s broader definition of the novel as realist(ic) or true to life.

narrative historian within the text. He is extraordinarily concerned with the emotional life of two young girls, “dos amigas del alma” (*Carmen y Adela* 120). In this short sketch, more a *cuento* or *relato* than a full-fledged realist novel, he seems determined to decipher the mysterious zone of private contact between two adolescent *habaneras* struck by cholera.

The author of *Carmen y Adela*, José Zacarías González del Valle, is by no means a foreigner to the universe he describes. In fact, because the story occurs at a particular time and place, in a Euro-Creole bourgeois social milieu, his representations seem more real than fictional. The text abides by Ian Watt’s requirement that the realist novel convey “the impression of fidelity to human experience” in that it is meant to seem familiar, even uncanny, to its readers (14). González del Valle creates what Edward Said calls an “alternate world,” an imaginary, virtual space that is nonetheless close to the texture (the text or context) of the everyday (*Beginnings* 81). Peter Brooks says that realist novels “offer us a kind of reduction—*modèle réduit*—of the world, compacted into a volume that we know can provide, for the duration of our reading, the sense of a parallel reality that can almost supplant our own” (*Realist Vision* 2). Realist(ic) fiction attempts to be a full, authentic report of human experience in a particular place and time while simultaneously appearing, as Iser would say, to “impose” a role on the reader. In this case, that role is of (Creole white, male) guardian of Cuba’s individual hygiene and collective morality.<sup>9</sup>

To paraphrase Alejandra Laera, a fictional space must be invented within the text of a novel in order to recount that which other genres will not, or cannot, tell (23). In the case of this *cuento*, the individualized reality of the epidemic is often so grotesque or monstrous that it cannot be recounted in a social or medical history. Fiction steps in to lend a hand, operating on the imaginary of the subject to reproduce that which may otherwise be too painful to revisit. In this way, it may function therapeutically to help the reader overcome the ongoing psychological trauma of the disaster. At the same time, historical fact, offered in *modèle réduit*, lends credibility and universality to a lurid tale of plague. In this story, the horrifying intensity of the cholera epidemic is personalized through particular characters in a social environment contemporary to 1830s Cuban readers. The reality of the plague is reconstituted through the universalizing yet particularizing tendency of the modern novel (Watt 16). This lends an “air of authenticity” to the story that other genres—like history, poetry, or medical treatise—might not. Through an individualized rendering of disease, the novel creates a close correspondence between “real” life and life’s reduplication in writing. Apart from the suspension of disbelief, it does not appear to demand too much from the reader; nor does it display its agenda directly. At the same time, it appears to work alongside the discourse of public hygiene. Both mine for a unified truth about the human subject that seems to lie just beyond its grasp.

In this tale, González del Valle invites his fellow Cubans to witness a set of intimate events which he historicizes, in fiction as (if) real. These scenes take place in his own city, in the very recent past of the cholera epidemic which he narrates in the first person plural: “¡Época que jamás se borrará de nuestra memoria!” (*C y A* 103). He uses the narrator to supplement or supplant the empirical wisdom of medical science, showing that neither science nor the author of this text holds a monopoly on the truth. The presence of the narrator, as the reader’s confidant, is meant to vouch for the veracity of the author’s story. Yet even two authoritative voices do not suffice. As Edward Said writes, in narrative, “[author, narrator, and reader] each desires the company of another voice” as if to render himself more authentic or authoritative (*Beginnings* 88). Richard Harvey Brown, in *A Poetic for Sociology*, would agree:

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<sup>9</sup> This piece circulated primarily among the Euro-Creole male members of Del Monte’s *tertulia*. See Ch 3.

The various voices do not cancel each other out, nor is truth limited to those points on which they agree; instead, much as characters in a play, each voice enriches the others, each contributes to the dialectical construction of more and more comprehensive *meta*-perspectives (69-70).

Any analysis of authorship, as Said says, “exposes the uneasiness and vacillation with which narrative fiction begins and from which it develops” (*Beginnings* 88). The social reality of 1830s Havana is narrated as a collective, veridical history belonging to everyone with the power to read the novel and disseminate its implicit norms. This means that the full truth can neither be approached directly nor possessed by any one individual. For Brown, “knowledge is possible only through the interpretative processes which the knower enacts in his encounter with the subjects in question” (Costa Lima 145). As this chapter will show, the novel can undermine any unifying concept of authoritative knowledge by the very use of the “subjects in question” that it employs for its project.

### ***The Control of the Imaginary***

Luiz Costa Lima states that modern history and the realist novel constitute and complement each other because the novel, starting in the eighteenth century, “mak[es] itself like history” (87). To cite Costa Lima more fully, “the novel is close not only to the prose of everyday life but also to the narrative form privileged since the end of the eighteenth century: the form of history” (87). Instead of proclaiming its origin in myth or fable, the early novel—to endorse what Costa Lima calls “the veto of fiction”—imitates the forms of history and science (44). It de-emphasizes its own fictional character by basing itself in and around historical facts such as a revolution or an epidemic. It “deploy[s] itself as a parallel to legitimate history,” representing or imitating the real world (102). The early novel describes these facts from a purportedly objective position, wherein the writer’s supposedly unified subjectivity “gives birth” to truth (95, 133). By collecting data derived from “scientific” observation, it attempts to stay as close as possible to reality (87). History in the modern era privileges the novel as a means of realistically portraying the past, since “histories are narratives of what has happened in the world” (95). In parallel fashion, fiction participates historically in the most intimate actualities of human life (Said, *Beginnings* 141). But since both are narrated by somebody who stands in a certain position, “they will tend to contain differences even when the observers are equally honest” (Costa Lima 95). The boundary between history (as science) and the novel (as fiction) is blurred; in fact, one begins to wonder if in fact they constitute each other.

At some point, the undeniably creative aspect of the writing of history (the “unscrupulous face of art” that “hangs on” to history) became “naturalized” in the form of the novel (Costa Lima 96-9). The narrative form gave history the feeling that it was a unified, self-enclosed entity (White, *Metahistory* 1-42), effectively balancing history’s dueling qualities of poesis (creative production) and scientific objectivity. Costa Lima quotes: “A great descriptive talent was required of history; instead of relating chronologically, it had to inquire into hidden motives and arrange fortuitous events according to an internal order” (93). History’s task was to register or translate a given event for the reader. Its narrators—including the authors of the early novel—hid their positionality through a supposedly universal viewpoint. Yet the very fact of being human encroaches upon the concept of authorship. We now understand that by its intervention, any act of interpretation by the subject alters and refashions the object of investigation, be it a human subject or a material object (142). Yet even if this fiction of objectivity were possible in the

classical concept of science, it could not survive in an analysis of modern fiction. Michel de Certeau writes that history “is a narrative that in fact functions as a discourse organized by the place of the ‘interlocutors’ and grounded in the place that the ‘author’ claims in relation to his readers. It is the place from which it is produced that gives the text authority” (Costa Lima 143). This is as much as to say that the characteristic of author versus that of character, or of subject versus object, are always relative. The position of the interrogated subject (the “object” of study) and the authorial “subject” are not so opposed as they seem because both, in fact, are human subjects. For Said, the novel sets up an artificial relationship: “[E]ach [literary] invention is... a way of temporarily forcing a created subject-object upon the world” (*Beginnings* 152). This project that is risky because of its contingency upon the unstable subject.

In his *Control of the Imaginary*, Costa Lima argues that the French Revolution was a decisive moment in the development of fiction. Compared to a natural disaster like “an almost universal earthquake, an immeasurable flood,” it was at first an unwelcome shock that later proved its usefulness. The Revolution caused the collapse of an old order—social, political, artistic—and forced the inception of a new one (Costa Lima 66). According to the dominant perspective, such a phenomenon caused a revolution in conceptualizing the role of the (European) individual as well as the larger social body. Principally, at least in Western Europe, the idea of personal (subjective) freedom came to be espoused as the individual version of a newly envisioned collective freedom, articulated in terms of nationality (68).<sup>10</sup> The subject was “freed” from the rigidity of the old order predominant in the aristocratic estate society of pre-revolutionary France. Under that order, “subjectivity was less negated... than it was subordinated and subsumed by supposedly natural principles” of divinely ordained rule (54-5). Now these principles had been overturned. In ascendance was a new paradigm, theorized by the likes of Locke and Leibniz, defined by mathematical science, empirical data, and the irreducibility of the individual.

No longer controlled by the naturalized hierarchies of estate society, the concept of the individual subject acquires new relevance and new complexity. However, this subjectivity, with all of its desires, can be dangerous if its energy is not effectively channeled. Art’s social function in this new era is to provide guidance to the subject, to direct its constitution of the world through the stimulation and manipulation of the imaginary (52). Since fiction by nature was seen as “mendacious” and “false,” the author had to set forth its internal “remedy,” a cure for the venomous possibilities that such writing ignites. Scientific objectivity and the imparting of moral instruction would somehow neutralize, or even erase, fiction’s inherently deleterious properties (26). Costa Lima states that “awareness of fiction’s poisonous effect had in fact been acknowledged by the Roman emperors” (26)<sup>11</sup>. But if fiction’s task was pedagogical, then it could be deemed a worthy and useful art form. Inasmuch as it remains faithful to the narratives of “objective” history and science, fictional prose becomes the narrative of choice in the attempt to control both individual subjectivity and collective (national) consciousness.

While the narrative of history was the inspiration for realist prose writers, the narrative of scientism authorized their work. Literature, bound to very real interests, could thus render these interests ordained by “nature” or “God.” Social reality and human nature become “the scenario of a narrative, the narrative of the national state, legitimated by the chosen mode of observation, namely that of science” (Costa Lima 88). The concept of nationality becomes naturalized

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<sup>10</sup> Costa Lima contrasts poetry—the genre for individual self-expression—with the novel, the genre for collective national expression.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that Costa Lima chooses the words “remedy” and “poisonous,” as if he is trying to conflate his concept of “fiction” with that of “writing” (ie: the *pharmakon*) in general.

through novelistic fiction. Narrative prose normalizes it as the legitimate, substantive replacement for the defunct estate society. The new narrative of nationality brought with it the promise (and the premise) of individual freedom as a miniature, personalized version (Peter Brooks' *modèle réduit*) of the national freedom of the social body. Conveniently, it seemed, subjectivity could be organized under the yoke of national patriotism; "nationalist sentiment would meld with the privileges accorded history to produce literary expression in the novel" (Costa Lima 68).

### Controlling Subjects

José Zacarías González del Valle's novel is an example of an early, beleaguered attempt to control dangerous subjectivity through a realistic—though by no means objective—historical narrative. Underlying his observations is the latent proto-national fiction that characterizes much of nineteenth century novelistic production. The narrative focus on scientific history's "hidden motives" for selecting certain individuals—and not others—for exclusion from the national "imagined community" masks the writer's own particular position vis-à-vis this history. The authorial subject does not simply "impose itself," in a totalizing way, on a passive object of study such as a character (Costa Lima 133). Nor does the object enable the subject to reveal an objective truth. Instead, the object and the authorial subject have a continuing effect on each other. As Costa Lima shows, they are uncannily interdependent and intertwined; perhaps they recognize part of themselves (each "self") in each other (the "other"). Even if, Costa Lima affirms, "the experiences and values of narrators and characters are distinguishable from the experiences and values of the author...there is neither a schizophrenic separation nor a simple continuity [between them]" (53). Instead, he argues, "the agent—that is, the writer—is not the same as the character, but the character would not be as he or she is if the agent were not as he or she is" (113). Thus, they are contingent upon each other. Each of these two subjects only exists through mutual acknowledgment, mutual recognition. Remembering Brooks' *modèle réduit*, fiction is a mirror of the world; as in fiction, so too in life. In short, "[fiction] is a process," says Costa Lima, "that is therefore not to be confused with the expression of the 'I,' but instead must be seen in connection with its unfolding" (53).

Novelistic characters come into being as subjects through writing, just as real-life people come into being through interpellation, through speech. Since an author is also a human subject, he is not exempt from the narrative process (written, spoken, or tacitly understood) by which we subjects make life's meaning intelligible. As Said demonstrates, both "the human subject...and its author are fictions together produced during the writing" (*Beginnings* 157). I think that this *together* is important because it shows that all subjects are the product of some sort of narrative process. In the case of this novel, the narrator is a unique character, a manifestation of the author's self-production. He enables the writer to contact those suspicious "other" characters whom, as objects of interpretation, the writer sees as essentially different from ("other" to) himself. He provides yet another layer of mediation between the author and the written text. However, the writer cannot escape the fact that, as Said points out, human authority is always contingent. This is even more the case when the narrator is present.

A central theme in González del Valle's novel is a call to judgment about which subjects can be deemed legitimate members of the collective social body, and which cannot. Much of this process of determination depends on the "scientific" assessment of an individual's physical and moral suitability for proto-national or communal Cuban belonging. Only the most appropriate of observers—like the author and his trusted sidekick, the narrator—is capable of "reading" or

getting to the heart of a character's essence. The narrative charges the reader with a similar task. Through the parallel, overlapping, and sometimes indistinguishable processes of writing and reading, the subject learns to "judge" the differences between right and wrong.<sup>12</sup> To quote Ian Watt, "the distinctive narrative mode of the novel . . . is the sum of literary techniques whereby the novel's imitation of human life follows the procedures adopted by philosophical realism in its attempt to ascertain and report the truth" (31). However, neither writing nor reading can conceal its positionality.

The novel tries and fails to draw a line in the sand separating the "legitimate" subjective Self from the illegitimate Other. It shows that the subject is not an autonomous, self-transparent agent that Cartesian thinkers imagined it to be. A subject, in fact, cannot always control what it invents. Said says that man is never the author of what he does (*Beginnings* 133). As Freud said of dreams, so with fiction: neither is the privileged offspring of its author's imagination. Between the dreamer and the interpreter, or between the object of investigation and its subject, there exists a complex analytic relationship. Sometimes the object *is* the subject. Just like the psychoanalyst who cannot control his own dreams, the writer might find that, far from being univocal, he (or his dream?) has spawned a complex dialectic between himself and his work. *Carmen y Adela* inspires this kind of critical analysis. If the novel or its novelist hopes to choreograph the subjects that it creates, then it is a prime example of how fiction successfully undermines itself. Says Lukács: "No writer is a true realist—or even a truly good writer, if he can direct the evolution of his own characters at will" (11).

The choice of protagonists in this novel seem familiar, "everyday," and harmless, just as the subjects themselves are full of girlish charms. The precocious Carmen, with her "constitución delicada," her "tez blanca y sutil," and her "frente angélica," seems "preciosa" (*C y A* 92). Her eyes gleam with the radiant light of intelligence; her direct gaze is "limpia." Moreover, she is "aseada" and "modesta en extremo," always dressed in the most thoughtful and "decent" manner (101). She looks like a perfect model of healthy Cuban youth, a pure, restrained subject. But looks can deceive, especially in a society as complex as this one.<sup>13</sup> Together with her assiduous comportment, Carmen is a "conjunto" of "hechizos" (102). Those words should already sound a warning bell of danger.<sup>14</sup> She entrances not only her schoolmates, teachers, and parents, but her narrator as well; in short, any subject who, recognizing her/himself in the actions of one of these fictitious characters, is taken by her coquettish charms.

The control of the subjective, Costa Lima writes, is only effective with the consent of the agential subject (55). It will take time for González del Valle to control Carmen, a slippery subject of his own invention. She is what Derrida would call a *pharmakos*, the human scapegoat who must be continually, eternally ejected from the body of the city in a periodic process of ritual cleansing, boundary making, and nation building (130-33). Through fiction, if not in real life, he will attempt to rid himself, and Cuban society, of the abject. On the other hand, the narrator—another creation of the authorial subject—is not so easily manipulated. If his job is to be historical chronicler, he soon reveals himself to be much more than what Costa Lima would call a "scientific" or neutral observer (88). He may give an exhaustive presentation of Carmen's physique, but he cannot disavow his "selectiveness of vision" in choosing her body over another

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<sup>12</sup> Derrida calls the writer a legislator; the reader a judge. See "Plato's Pharmacy" 113-14. Ian Watt compares the reader to a jury in a court of law. See *The Rise of the Novel* 31.

<sup>13</sup> And maybe names can, too. *Carmen* can mean "charm" in Latin, which in turn is one of the English translations for the Greek *pharmakon*. To charm, according to the OED, is also "to influence, control, subdue, bind, etc.; to put a spell upon; to bewitch, enchant." Much can be read into Carmen's name prior to any "suspicious" activity on her part.

<sup>14</sup> It is well known that in the nineteenth century, the figure of Woman was equated with sexuality, seduction, perversity, and even witchcraft. See Nina Auerbach, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Gilbert and Gubar, or even Jean Lamore.

(Watt 31). His own subjectivity—albeit fictional—cannot disengage from the emotional pathos of the invented universe of which he is a part. His attempts to “authentically” report the characters under investigation only increase his own enmeshment in a messy—one might say unhygienic—situation. He cannot speak of their behavior independently either from his subject position or from the process of observation. Just like the author, he is unable to separate the object of his investigation from the object of his experience (Said, *Beginnings* 160-61). Especially when the “object” of investigation is another subject, he cannot speak about it without involving his own Self (Costa Lima 148-49). His knowledge, just like the author’s, is independent neither of his unfolding subjectivity nor his own experience of the world. Rather, it is contingent upon his objects (or rather, subjects) of study. He is the novelistic example of how writing both gives meaning to the things that it names and yet can also—especially in fiction, where it encounters other subjects—get carried away by itself. In short, the narrator is not immune to “hechizos,” either of the girls he describes nor—more importantly—of the seductiveness of his own descriptions.

### **Appearance versus Essence**

At first glance, Carmen appears to be an exemplary young female. But unblemished good looks sometimes mask a deeper, darker truth. In fact, one lesson of this novel will be that illness can lurk behind angelic appearance, or that impure essence can be contained behind a pure façade. Yet the narrator must find physical proof of inner contamination. For the careful observer, one or two slightly disrupted aspects of her physiognomy might reveal clues to a less-than-hygienic physiology. For instance, her beautiful skin is “teñida de una sombra violácea alrededor de los ojos” (*C y A* 92). This may be the subtlest of *manchas*, but the stain is still visible. Carmen’s aesthetic near-perfection may actually mask a more subtle form of ill health. While the origins of such weakness may be impossible to pin down in writing, that does not stop the narrator from carefully scrutinizing her body for signs. In fact, the more difficult she is to describe, the more anxious the historical chronicler becomes to impale her onto the page with his pen. Another way of saying this would be that the more she reveals herself to be a projection of the imaginary—a replica of the real, a *modèle réduit*—instead of material reality itself, the more she vexes, irritates, and perturbs any narrative authority that might exist. As seen in a hazy light of idyllic, pre-epidemic circumstances, Carmen is an icon of nubile, luscious femininity, with her “facciones finas y hermoso color” (101). However, if the devil is in the details, then the details should arouse suspicion. After all, *ser* does not always equal *parecer*, especially in Cuba.

One cannot fail to note the emphasis on Carmen’s “delicate constitution.” In this era, extreme delicacy of temperament was often the sign of predilection toward disease. According to Dr. Francisco Calcagno, cholera, for example, favors the cowardly, the weak, “los individuos dotados de una complexion débil” (*Tratado* 66). While a faint-hearted appearance does not always equal debility of spirit, a weak “constitution” certainly does. To the discerning scientific eye it may signal a “dissolute” (ie: enfeebled) attitude toward life and “un moral abatido, triste o pusilánime” (*Tratado* 66). While Carmen does not have a pessimistic personality, her extreme sensitivity indicates a proclivity toward emotional excess, both positive and negative. As the situation changes and she is confronted with a “ciudad apestada” and a battle for her life, these qualities become more of a liability than an asset (*C y A* 104). She lacks the determination, probity, and strength of character required to survive the blight; thus the reader extrapolates from this example that she is unsuitable for national belonging.

In addition to her weak constitution, the purplish circles under the eyes are a physical indication of moral languidness, of someone who, as contemporary medical theory put it, “se halla debilitad[a] por su desarreglo en el modo de vivir” (*Tratado* 66), regardless of class or race. Weakness of spirit was equated with weakness of willpower, perseverance and resolve to stand up and fight back against disease. As Social Darwinism would later define it, she is unfit for survival. Setting aside the possibility that Carmen’s visible “sombra violácea” could be a sign of tainted blood,<sup>15</sup> it can also be read as an outer mark of internal lack of purity manifested by an external excess of sensitivity.

In hindsight, one could argue that the narrator consciously chooses to highlight for his fellow observers the subtleties that hint at embodied illness. In his empirical practice, he cannot afford to skip any details. If such flaws such as *debilidad* and *desarreglo* can be spread by negative example, then Carmen would be the type of subject with whom to avoid contact. In this sense, the narrator imparts an influential lesson to supplement the discourse of public hygiene. Even if it is too late for him to avoid contact with fictional deviance, he can teach others that contagion lurks even in the most unsuspecting of characters. On the other hand, the inclusion of two slight physical imperfections in the descriptions of Carmen could mean nothing. It seems more likely that the narrator is simply enamored of his subject, and thus lets himself be “seduced” both by her body and by his intricate descriptions of it (Said, *Beginnings* 88). His relationship to Carmen’s body and—especially—to his own image of her parallels that of the author to the written text. Both objects of study—the body, the text—acquire a certain agency that their subject—the narrator, the author—did not intend. As Luis Costa Lima remarks of fictional discourse: “the author of such discourse does not control its reception,” perhaps not even its reception by the subjects inhabiting the fictional worlds themselves (47). Like dreams, the latter “operate along a line like those established by poetic—if not all artistic—experience: they convert perceived material, the ‘day residue,’ into images that then assume their own activity, achieving an autonomy for which the originating material is not responsible” (47).

### **Embodied Deviance**

From here, the physical and moral outlines of the characters are filled in by the colorful details of Carmen’s relationship with Adela. After all, no truth can be more damning than the empirical evidence of a close observer. While both girls’ public faces show them to be charming and self-contained, they throw caution to the winds the minute they are together. Ignoring the vicious rumors that circulate around them, they eschew proper decorum to spend time exclusively with one another. They forego modesty and moderation and plow headlong into their excessive intimacies. One early sign of their abnormalized behavior lies in the novel’s use of the term *cuidar*: for instance, the two girls “se cuid[an] poco de lo que las demás dijeran” (92). Lack of *cuidado*, as we remember from Chapter One, has multiple connotations and dangerous consequences. *Descuido* in one arena can quickly affect or infect another, contaminating all aspects of life. Impure thoughts can infect the body as well as the other way around. However, the meticulously constructed opposition between *careful* and *careless* is quickly undone when we think about a fictional product like this novel: no matter how much thought and “care” the author might take to impart a moral lesson, the effects of his writing surpass any conscious intentions on his part.

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<sup>15</sup> The earliest version of the novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1839) also alludes to the visible signs of her impurity, well before it assigns them to her mixed blood (184).

The reader soon learns that the normally tranquil, studious Carmen is “delirious” about her friend Adela, that she can’t wait to see her at school every day, that when her companion arrives, Carmen “no pu[ede] contenerse” due to an overflow of excitement (92-4). The more that they are together, the more she bursts with a suspicious excess of emotion. One morning, Carmen brings the good news that Adela has been invited to come home with her after school. As she waits impatiently for her friend to arrive at the schoolhouse, the narrator contemplates her elevated emotional state with more than a little observational curiosity:

Considérese el contento de la interesante niña y la inquietud con que se revolvió en su asiento mudando á cada instante de postura. Todo era mirar por la puerta, poner el oído á las pisadas de las que entraban y latirle aceleradamente el corazón creyendo ver en cada una de las que venían a Adela, a quien iba a llenar de alegría con la nueva que a ella misma la inquietaba aún durante el sueño, que la hizo despertar desde muy temprano y no la dejó almorzar con fundamento con la impaciencia de que llegase la hora de ir para la escuela a encontrarse con su amiga (94).

Carmen’s radiant excitement upon the arrival of her “amiga” does seem a little suspicious. She begins to look like a unstable, excessive—if not downright perverse—character. As pure and enchanting as she is, her extraordinary lack of self-containment baffles the observer. She is a curious case of undisciplined behavior, of both excess and lack, in a seemingly white, bourgeois gentlewoman’s body. Her gender alone cannot explain this conundrum. She proves that appearance (even the appearance of “racelessness”<sup>16</sup>) does not always signify essence. Purity and impurity cannot be easily segregated, especially in a society saturated with as much socio-racial anxiety as Cuba.

Carmen’s emotional extremes soon become indistinguishable from physical displays considered inappropriate for a well-bred young lady of her social milieu. Unfortunately for her friend Adela, frequent physical contact breeds increased mental imbalance for both participants. When finally allowed a private visit, for example, the girls “por poco se enloquecen de contentas,” demonstrating that Adela is not immune to Carmen’s crazed fever of emotion (95). While Carmen is clearly the instigator of the affair, Adela responds in kind, such that, in a moment of emotional transference, she cries out with unbridled pleasure upon hearing Carmen’s “voz embriagadora” at a school recital, as happy as if she had received the honor herself (97).<sup>17</sup> The narrator, it is important to note, is as entranced by their relationship as if he were its main beneficiary:<sup>18</sup> “No sería fácil hallar otro ejemplo de amistad tan *pura*, tan tierna, amistad que brillaba en los más insignificantes pormenores” (99) (my emphasis). On the one hand, he passionately praises its virtue, honesty, tenderness, and purity; on the other, he continually examines its delirious intensity, as if trying to decipher its hidden motor. This pleasurable probing of mysterious, dual-edged Cuban subjectivity is the seductive project of (writing, narrating, and reading) the novel. He affirms that “entre ellas no había nada oculto,” mirroring the task of the early novel to separate the public sphere from the private.<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, he

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<sup>16</sup> I am using this term deliberately because, in that era and in this, whiteness is still largely understood to be the absence of race, or the “unmarked” race.

<sup>17</sup> While everyone, including the narrator, is taken by Carmen’s “angelical harmonies,” only Adela feels that she shares a special, supernatural connection with Carmen (97).

<sup>18</sup> Which—besides the author, of course—he is.

<sup>19</sup> See Lukács’ “Preface” to his *Studies in European Realism*, or Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, for an account of the ways that the novel helped to invent the concept of private space.

attempts to contact and penetrate a zone of emotions that the novel itself has deemed private. These zones, of course, remain veiled from his scrutiny.

When cholera threatens to divide them, Adela promises to return to Havana in the case of Carmen's infection and sit by her side in the case of her death (105). The mad "effusion" of Carmen's attention overwhelms the more subtly demonstrative Adela (106). Aware of the "supremacy" of Carmen's affection, she feels inexplicably "arrastrada hacia su amiga por la magia irresistible de sus influencias" (106-7). The narrator suggests that Carmen is the powerful sun that attracts Adela to its brilliant light; she is the massive planet around which Adela's smaller satellite revolves (106). It is as if Carmen's propensity toward deviant emotions operates like a magnet that pulls Adela into the force field of its orbit. Rather than receiving a beneficent influence from her companion, Adela veers off toward the occult, the inexplicable, the contaminated. The mysterious contact that they share breeds illness in more than one sense.

### **The Physical and the Moral<sup>20</sup>**

Immediately after noting the force of Carmen's charisma and the intensity of her affection, the reader learns of her failed battle with cholera. Although the spread of the disease is recounted in a general way, it is only now that its pernicious effects on Carmen are made visible. In a rhetorical linkage, the two chapters appear one after the other. It is as if González del Valle wants to prove a point not only about narrative, but also psycho-somatic, contamination: the unrestrained passion of Carmen's soul debilitates her extra-sensitive body; the ardency of her feeling affects the very course of the narrative. Carmen's "delicate constitution" and youthful vigor are adversely affected by uncontrolled extremes of feeling (which in turn might render her a weakling). It is unclear which comes first, illness of body or sickness of soul. In medical vocabulary, she might be one of those unfortunate souls "predisposed" to disease. In an indirect way, the novel implies that Carmen's contact with Adela (both emotional and physical) is not irrelevant to contagion (both physical and moral). In some unfathomable way, infection is linked to deviant forms—as well as excessive amounts—of affection.<sup>21</sup>

By this point, it seems clear that one of the lessons of the novel is that improper conduct—from any class of person, no matter how "proper" they seem—breeds somatic affliction. This theory could explain cholera's ravages upon the Euro-Creole bourgeoisie, a group that medicine tried to represent as "pure" and robust. White bourgeois subjects required lessons in moral and physical restraint just as much as any "other" socio-racial group. They were not immune to contagion. They were not as pure as they seemed. There exists a sneaking suspicion that, despite the best efforts of public hygiene to eradicate disease from the body of the people, the pathological Other might still be hidden within its midst. By highlighting the hidden vectors of disease within even the most "hygienic" segment of the Cuban population, this novel attempts to disentangle the abject Other from its bourgeois origins. If Carmen and Adela, born into the heart of white privilege, cannot be cured, then the implication is that they must not be authentic members of the bourgeoisie. If they are not, then who is? While the novel can eliminate these two, it cannot do away with all of the possibly contaminated Cuban subjects. It approaches, but

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<sup>20</sup> Even while it incorporates "scientific" vocabulary into its pages, the novel also disparages some forms of medical knowledge as the "machinations" of a group of quacks (103). Even while it uses the scientific method to observe human nature, it ridicules its own procedures, creating a parody of modern medicine. The excessive penetration of medical discourse into every realm causes "infinitos charlatanes" to take advantage of a gullible "pueblo atribulado" (103). Overall, the novel records and archives a collective suspicion of medicine's growing influence over all domains of life. If the resources of medicine are fruitless, perhaps literature will cure that which medicine cannot.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida highlights the linkage between these two words.

does not directly tackle, the fearful possibility that the diseased Other cannot be definitively eradicated from the Cuban social body, that the deviant abject lies in fact within the Self.

The rhetorical maneuver in the narration, linking Carmen's moral character with her physical (lack of) health, corroborates the French-influenced medical theory of the day. Early nineteenth century social science claims that "the physical and the moral" are intricately linked. As historian Elizabeth Williams asserts, this "science of man" deemed that the "realms of existence and experience" of mind versus body, of psychic versus physical, of willed versus unwilled action "were closely interdependent" (8). While psychic life could not be reduced to a set of physical symptoms, there existed an inherent interrelation or "rapport" between body and mind, such that mental trouble might manifest itself upon the body, and somatic pain would show up in the mind. Between the concepts of unease and disease lay the artificially constructed Cartesian dualism of an earlier era. Since medicine now planned to be comprehensive in scope, medical doctors often felt free to express opinions on issues ranging from individual emotions to broader social phenomena.

For a local example of medicine's social agenda, we can examine the writings of Julio Jacinto Le Riverend, a prolific physiologist, pathologist, and hygienist.<sup>22</sup> The distinguished doctor preaches that immorality is the most likely cause of illness. His inspiration comes from Reveillé-Parise's *Medicine Morale*, which cites "excitement" (much of it feminine) as the most dangerous cause of disease. Since the physical and the moral are connected by means of the nervous system, organic alterations of the system are caused more by "psychology" than by any "physical agents" (*Patología* 87): "La acción permanente de las afecciones vivas del alma," he writes, "es esencialmente perturbadora. Manteniendo las pasiones... en un estado permanente de agitación y de tensión, se comprende toda la peligrosa influencia que éste puede ejercer..." In order to avoid the diseases that he has observed for over thirty years in Cuba, he summarizes, "los sentimientos moderados son los únicos capaces de conservar la salud" (85). Needless to say, Carmen's sentiments vis-à-vis Adela (to say nothing of those of the narrator towards these subjects) have been anything but moderate. Le Riverend sums up by remarking that "la mayoría de las enfermedades tienen su punto de partida en las pasiones" (86). Passion for the medical doctor includes both excessive (most often female) as well as deviant (perverted) emotion. Physical-moral health requires not only proper, right-minded thinking. It also demands self-regulation of thoughts and behavior so that they do not stray off virtue's path. Health and hygiene thus equal conformity with moral laws. Aberrance, straying off the good and righteous path, is just as dangerous as immoderation, excess, or extremes.<sup>23</sup>

A contemporary Habanese pathologist like Francisco Calcagno would have argued that the peculiarity of the situation requires that the girls' "manner of living," their "pasiones deshonorosas," be explored in addition to their physical ailments (Calcagno, *Tratado* 56). He would have undergone a thorough investigation of the physical and the moral in the attempt to discern the "truth" behind their disease. What sets narrative prose fiction apart from the medical texts of Drs. Calcagno and Le Riverend is its extraordinarily personal—one might say passionate—interest in the zone of intimate, individual emotions. In this novel, González del Valle's narrator personifies this concern by involving himself as a character in the melodrama. It is not merely that his interest in the psychic supersedes the somatic in his detailed account of these emotions. It is that their effects on him are palpable. If the novel is an imitation of life, then

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that some—but not all—of the most prominent doctors in Cuba, like Le Riverend and Calcagno, were European: they came from France and Italy, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida calls writing "the *pharmakon*, the going or leading astray" (71).

he is a manifestation of the desire to close the zone of ambivalence between imitation and reality. He is not a disinterested medical observer, but a desirous, active subject eager to seek out a hidden “truth” in other subjects. He hopes to close the gap between the real and the imagined. But he is as riveted by the peculiar intimacies of Carmen and Adela’s friendship—the manifestation of their embodied deviance—as a compulsive pathologist would be by any physiognomical and physiological abnormalities. The closeness of his position is directly proportional to the intensity of his passion. In describing them, he seems determined to penetrate the inaccessible secrets of their partnership, to extract the psychological clues hidden in their particular interactions, and to appropriate their intimate pleasure for himself. He seems to believe that there is an essence to the relationship that, if only he probed deeply enough, he would be able to touch. Through his descriptions, he reaches for full contact with the life of his subjects. This formulation, of course, ignores the possibility that no essence exists beyond that which is created through the observations of the narrator, or indeed, through the text itself.

### Writing Deviance

Perhaps this is an appropriate time to pay tribute to Derrida, whose thinking on this subject has informed much of this particular “reading” of the novel, the author, and his narrator. In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida upbraids writing as a repetition of the absence of the real, material thing (the signified) itself. “Writing would indeed be the signifier’s capacity to repeat itself, by itself...without truth’s *presenting itself* anywhere (111) (emphasis in original). He implies that the truth of being, and the author of the text, is always already absent while something—a fictitious reproduction of that truth—is being staged in its absence. This representation supplements the original essence, which is never present in writing (if indeed it were ever present at all). Writing in general is always fictional, but narrative prose fiction in particular is conscious, ironic mimicry.<sup>24</sup>

The awareness of fiction’s false representation of the truth becomes conspicuous in this novel when we look at the narrator. Within the text of *Carmen y Adela*, the narrator tries, and continually fails, to penetrate the “essence” of dangerous subjectivity (the real, material thing) as personified by these two girls. His role is to reproduce the author’s struggle to represent the “truth” about Cuban subjectivity. Yet it is the very nature of writing (or of language, of discourse) that blocks access to this truth. The closer that writing gets to the heart of the matter, the more obvious its fruitless efforts in this endeavor become. In his subjects, the author has created a fiction of reality. Narration is his conscious acceptance of this realization. Neither author nor his ironic double, the narrator, will gain access to the truth of the matter. Edward Said calls this a “molestation” engendered by the limited and limiting authority of (human) authorship (*Beginnings* 84). In other words, the subjectivity of the author interferes with his efforts to be omnipotent. This occurs not only for the novelist but also for the narrator (as a character in the novel) and the critic (as a reader); or with any human subject involved with the text. The real “matter”—whether it be real authority and authenticity, the “indissoluble” self,<sup>25</sup> or the

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<sup>24</sup> To some extent, all writing could be called a mimicry, in that it satirizes as it imitates (whether consciously or not). Of course, Bhabha’s discussion of mimicry in the colonial context—as opening up a space of ambivalence bordering on mockery—is germane to my analysis. But mimesis is not so far removed from mimicry, because both express the desire for an Other (“as a subject of difference that is almost the same”) to mirror the Self (Bhabha, *Location* 122). For Costa Lima, mimesis is “the practice through which we approach what we are not, what we do not internalize as our own ‘self.’ Is it thus a practice that allows us to present ourselves as though we were an other—on the basis, however, of the difference from what we are” (133).

<sup>25</sup> For Costa Lima, mimesis is “a strategy directed against the indissolubility of the presence of the ‘self’” (133).

demystified body of a teenage girl—may or may not exist.<sup>26</sup> In any case, it is not accessible in pure form to the human subject. Writing, narrating, and reading, if not all of discourse, are the habitual, continuous processes of desiring, sometimes excessively, sometimes obsessively, to reproduce this absent truth.

The material subjects in this invented world of fiction are always already absent for the writer who seeks to represent them, just as they are at least doubly absent for the reader who absorbs this reproduction and responds to it as s/he will. Whether it exists concretely or not, the essence is nowhere to be seen, heard, or felt; only its seductive “traces” remain. Perhaps, as Barbara Johnson states, it is the substitution of an image—in this case, a graphic signifier—for real presence that enables subjective desire—already problematic—to proliferate. Referring to Rousseau’s analysis of masturbation, she explains that it is “the woman’s [sic] absence that gives immediacy to her imaginary possession” (*Dissemination* xii).<sup>27</sup> Since Rousseau compares masturbation with writing, the same can be said for the latter as for the former: the fictional construction of the object of desire arouses greater pleasure than the presence of the object itself. (Indeed, the “real” object might not behave as it would in the idealized reconstruction.)

Yet the pleasure produced by narrative is real. The narrator is its manifestation. Calling Carmen an “interesante niña” is but the tip of the iceberg. He muses about his subjects that “sus corazones se abrían el uno al otro, como dos lirios que nacen juntos y cuyos cálices pone de frente la brisa para que se manden sus perfumes” (*C y A* 99). It is possible that the narrator’s blatant lack of objectivity draws attention away from the author and allows González del Valle’s authorial voice to escape the reader’s scrutiny. But it does nothing to exonerate the narrator. By using a feminized flower metaphor, the novel does not merely attempt to tame the troublesome subjectivity of two unfathomably complex personalities. It also renders the narrator—as the historian of their fictional reality—the primary beneficiary of their disturbing yet intoxicating enchantments. The slow process of investigation is a macabre sort of narrative striptease because it lingers on increasing excitement rather than climax.<sup>28</sup> As the story continues, the narrative voyeur becomes more and more entranced by the emotional turbulence of the situation. His contact with González del Valle’s other<sup>29</sup> representations has heightened his own perverse interest in that which has been constructed as deviance. His mounting pleasure mirrors the pleasure of, in, and produced by, the text.<sup>30</sup> In addition, his presence is a cover for the author’s material absence from the text. The more obvious it becomes that no adults are in the room, the more desirous and delirious the narrator becomes.

This narrator can be read as manifestation of the author’s lack of control over his written product. That the narrator’s investigations run away with him is a mark of the writer’s frustrated authority, not only over his own characters, but over subjectivity in general. The author is a human being with a limited perspective. Even if this novel was meant to bestow some kind of moral instruction upon those who come into contact with it, writing can have the opposite effect from what was intended (Derrida 104-5). If writing is trying to cure a desire that it deems unhygienic, epidemic, or contagious, it also produces more of the same. Here, the narrator shows that the writer’s authority over his subjects is contingent upon their imagined response. The

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<sup>26</sup> Said seems to hint at the possibility that it does exist. Citing Kierkegaard’s grounding in religious truth, Said insists that “there is something still more authentic, beside which fiction is secondary” (85).

<sup>27</sup> In a similar manner, Rodrigo Lazo says about *Cecilia Valdés* that writing the book was one way for Cirilio Villaverde to discursively “seize” the island of Cuba after nearly forty years in exile in New York. To put something into writing is to possess it in a way that the material thing never can be. See Lazo as well as the Epilogue to this dissertation.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida was not the first to link writing to desire, pleasure, or sex, but he is one of the most convincing.

<sup>29</sup> Other than himself; Other to himself.

<sup>30</sup> The concepts of striptease narrative and “the pleasure of the text,” of course, come from Barthes.

problem is that as the writer tries to solidify his authority, this self-sufficiency is undermined by the instability of the human subject. The writer is a false authority, and the power he holds over his fictional universe is but a temporarily effective, if pleurably seductive, masquerade.

Instead of focusing simply on the external signs of illness, the physical “symptoms” of disease, the novel probes its subjects’ emotions or morals, that which “lies deepest inside”<sup>31</sup> the physical façade. Of course, instead of inside and outside, these are two sides (or “leaves,” as Derrida would say) of the same coin. They are mutually constitutive, and one cannot be analyzed without the other.<sup>32</sup> While Carmen suffers physical torment, the narrator remarks with pity that her bodily torture pales in comparison to the psychic pain of Adela’s absence.

Los dolores agudísimos de su enfermedad la martirizaban; pero la ausencia de su amiga era un cuchillo cuyos filos herían demasiado su corazón: la voz de la amistad la hablaba más alto que las penas del cuerpo (*C y A* 110).

The narrator seems simultaneously ashamed of his intimate knowledge of her pain, horrified at the spectacle of such complete martyrdom, and fascinated by the intimacy to which he is an unwelcome intruder. In other words, he is exterior (but close) to their private exchange, just as writing in general—and this novel in particular—is exterior (but close) to “truth.” On the one hand, the narrator continues to pathologize (as well as genderize) Carmen’s emotional agony as Other to himself and—by natural extension—to any legitimate subject of the Cuban community. On the other hand, he is not unaffected by her suffering—just as the writer cannot remain unaffected by his creation. Writing (and suffering) “affect[s] or infect[s]” him with what Derrida terms “maleficent penetration,” the ability of a written text to pierce the fabricated interiority of the Self (110). Thus, Carmen’s “eyes capaces de ablandar las piedras” would terrify any reasonable person, but their capacity to disturb the observer (to “infect” him internally with their poisonous pathos) is proportional to his proximity to them inside the text (*C y A* 113). The author may be materially absent from the scene, but the acts of reading—and of writing—that he has engendered are not without their own affective power.

### **Deviant Desire**

Lest the reader see Carmen as an embodied figure of pure, martyred sainthood, we are reminded yet again that she is tainted, contaminated, by evident psychological *desequilibrio*. As if to signal divine punishment for her imagined sins, her physical torment intensifies as she approaches death. Yet even in the midst of what the narrator construes as a steadily mounting lunacy (in stark opposition to his own purported mental sanity and physical distance from the spectacle), her thoughts remain consciously and steadfastly focused on her loved one: “‘Mamá,’ exclamaba sin cesar, ‘me muero y Adela no viene’” (114). And with that, she expires.

While Carmen anguishes in bed, Adela luxuriates at the seaside resort hub of Guanabacoa, unaware of her friend’s dire predicament. When Adela is finally called to her bedside, her mother tries to dissuade her from returning to the city, that sea of infection. But it is too late to save Adela from the frenzy which has already mastered her, body and soul. “[M]urmurando sobre la locura que se había encaprichado en cometer su hija,” the mother consents (117). Of course, Adela’s beloved companion is already quite stiffly cadaverous, a fact to which she reacts violently. “Dando un grito frenético de dolor” upon entering the death

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<sup>31</sup> I am quoting from Derrida’s analysis of writing as simultaneously interior and exterior; see page 110 of *Dissemination*.

<sup>32</sup> One is the other’s “constitutive outside,” and vice versa. See Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* 192-94.

chamber, she throws herself onto Carmen's "frozen body," "regalándolo con sus lágrimas y besándolo sin descanso..." (118). This is the pathos of a woman mad with grief, not the delirium of a raving lunatic. While the narrator does depict her as crazed with emotion, he is also visibly wracked by emotion himself. He sighs: "sus exclamaciones tiernas sobre todo encarecimiento partían el alma" (118). Instead of purifying the observer's emotions through catharsis, contact with this tragedy further heightens the sensation of painful pleasure or pleasurable pain.

The "cadaverous rigidity" of Carmen's body does not prevent the observer-subject from responding emotionally every time it is revisited. Her absence from the scene does not preclude disease's continuing presence. The body, after all, is still present. Likewise, the so-called "cadaverous rigidity" of writing does not prevent its receiver(s) from reacting again and again, and differently with each reading (Derrida 79). The author's absence does not foreclose the continual presence of his writing. As *pharmakon*, writing—like the disease that remains after its host is gone—cannot be fenced in with a cordon sanitaire. Arguably, it creates anew every time it is encountered. It runs, it errs, it drifts like "an outlaw, a pervert...a vagrant" with a half-life of its own (Derrida 143). Through close contact with this illegitimate vagabond, the observer (whether the narrator or the reader) contracts its perversion, its pleasurable yet painful disease.

To return to our fictional subjects, this surfeit of somaticized affect does not come without consequences for those who come into contact with it. In its implacable quest for victims, cholera does not delay in "ravaging" Adela's "disobedient" body in turn (*C y A* 118-19). Just as Carmen's love affected Adela's psyche, so her disease infects Adela's soma. Her mother, denying Adela's agency, blames herself for allowing her daughter to return from her coastal safe haven to the plague-saturated city of Havana: "culpándose a sí misma por la debilidad que padeció en dejar ir a Adela a la Habana" (119). Tragically, she realizes, disease has literally permeated Adela's impressionable adolescent body, and nothing can be done to reverse the infection. Even medicine is incapable of saving her: "estaban agotados infructuosamente todos los recursos de la medicina" (113). While Adela's family watches helplessly, "salió su espíritu de este mundo á unirse en la eternidad con el de Carmen" (119). There is no place for either Carmen or Adela in sanitized, post-cholera future.

Again and again the narrative rhetorically links impetuous actions to diseased outcomes. In one last example, cholera attacks Adela immediately after she has tenderly and passionately caressed Carmen, anxiously shaken her as if to awaken her from the dead, and whispered insistently to her beloved in an imaginary and intimate conversation, "como si la pudiera oír, como si las dos nada más estuvieran sobre el mundo" (118). Carmen's physical-moral disease has infected her companion and deprived her of her senses. After Adela suffers the first visible effects of cholera, she clings madly to her now-incoffined friend, such that "el cuerpo de Carmen...costó mucho trabajo arrancar de los brazos de la desahuciada Adela" (119). Even in the throes of death, ill-fated "infausta" adamantly refuses to detach herself from her companion (118). It will be similarly difficult for the narrator, by now inflected (or perverted?) through contact, to take leave of his pathologized subjects.

The narrator, while anxious to affirm his own legitimate place in society, does not attempt to mask his titillated, horrified, and even morbid fascination with the macabre. His mistake is that he misjudges his distance from the scenes he describes. He seems to think he is "safe" from unhygienic contact, somehow "outside" the narrative (Derrida 36). He takes perverse delight in the sensuous intimacy and ultimate doom of this star-crossed relationship. Not only is he intrigued by the rebellious subjectivity of the two girls. He is also fascinated by the correlation between psychosomatic contact and life-extinguishing disease. It is unclear whether

cholera unveils the ugly truth of a subject's putrid essence, or rather that predisposition—both lack of bodily self-discipline and excess of emotion—encourages cholera's proliferation and spread. Instead of exploring the scientific reasons behind the epidemic, as a medical document would do, the text investigates the exact kind of pleasurable contact—manifested by the narrator as well as the girls—that helps “disease” (or desire) to spread.

If, before the cholera epidemic, Carmen and Adela were able to disguise themselves and pass as normalized, even exemplary citizens, disease (or desire) lays bare their true selves. If they were depicted as relatively pure subjects before, disease (or desire) renders their inherent impurities completely visible. Disease is that which separates the hygienic from the anti-hygienic, the Self from the Other. But it is also that which binds them together. Disease reveals itself as powerful narrative desire to uncover the truth that it imagines exists. This, of course, is a fruitless enterprise, since writing has exacerbated the problem that it supposedly meant to solve. If it hopes to logically explain Carmen and Adela's disease, the novel has undermined its project by contracting the “disease” of desire itself. Yet that does not inoculate it against itself.

What makes Carmen and Adela so dangerous is that, prior to the feverish activity spawned by the epidemic, they succeeded at appearing normal, healthy, and pure. Even the narrator is taken by their seeming perfection. They behaved like any well-bred young ladies of their social milieu. They passed as models of feminine modesty and decorum. If in reality they were hiding something perverse—like an autonomous disease with a life of its own—then this has implications beyond themselves. It opens up the possibility that this kind of masquerade might be widespread. It proposes that disease might be rampant even among whites and the well-to-do. It signals the characters' inherent similarity to other members of the Creole bourgeoisie, if not to all fellow subjects.<sup>33</sup> It means, for example, that they are not so very different from the narrator, or for that matter, the author, who in fact lived through the cholera epidemic himself. If two seemingly pure, healthy girls can succumb so readily to disease, he implies, then so could “we”—Cubans, readers, writers, selves, subjects. This may help explain the narrator's obsession with the seemingly inconsequential relationship of these two girls. It is as if, in penetrating the enigma of their secret life, he could reveal a key aspect of the Cuban self and its perceived susceptibility to disease.

### **Disease Dissected**

Be it moral or physical, psychological or somatic, illness signifies all that is unmanageable about Cuban subjectivity, if not subjectivity in general. The cholera epidemic helped the concept of disease to accrue a much broader meaning than it had heretofore enjoyed. It had provoked what Foucault would call a discursive explosion, much of it recorded in writing. But as Derrida affirms, instead of snuffing out disease, this writing, operating as a pharmakon, causes disease to “metastasize” (101). The concept of disease had begun as an excuse to investigate Cuban subjectivity. It became an opportunity to bring the subject under rationalized control. As we saw in Chapter One, the discourse of public hygiene was one effect of the literal disease, the epidemic crisis. Narrative fiction was another. While literature worked more subtly than social medicine, it was no less a technology of identification, classification, and control. It helped consolidate a biomedicalization of social discourse begun by the campaign for public hygiene. It also anticipated the increasing influence that medicine would have over the course of the century. This does not mean, however, that it accomplished its goals.

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<sup>33</sup> Even if slaves are excluded from the debate over subjectivity in 1830s Cuba, free blacks and mulattos were certainly considered valid subjects, rendering this inherent similarity between all Cubans problematic, to say the least.

Public hygiene (in its written form, medical treatises and advice) and narrative prose fiction are two forms of this discursive proliferation. Their projects are very similar. They are both concerned about the body, which, as Julio Ramos tells it, became in 1830s Cuba “a source of public meaning and value” (“Citizen” 188). Using the body, they want to show that what *appears* to be is not always what *is*, especially in Cuba where socio-racial fears run rampant. Both sets of discourses want to teach the subject how to reproduce, on an individualized scale, different types of surveillance of the body. Through this process of collective normalization they attempt to build national community of sanitized subjects.

First, both sets of projects—public hygiene, prose fiction—capitalize on the concept of the body—individual as well as collective—as a way to control and manipulate Cuban subjectivity. Bodies are at once valuable (they are malleable; they are productive) and risky (they have lives and deaths of their own; they induce contact with other bodies). On the “positive” or productive side, these projects encourage public and private health through the care of the body and a submission to discipline and morality. On the negative side, they use disease—health’s dark underbelly—to represent the monstrous, the grotesque, the wild, or the ungovernable. The specter of disease is meant to scare a bewildered populace (“un pueblo atribulado”) into passive submission (*C y A* 103). As the concept of a diseased body comes to be associated with social abnormality, illness is projected onto all those who do not fit into prescribed social categories. While this association between sickness and deviance became prevalent in the second half of the century,<sup>34</sup> it was already being explored in 1830s Cuba through narrative prose fiction and the accompanying discourse of public hygiene.

Second, both sets of discourses teach the public to be wary of appearances. They lead Cuban subjects not to equate *ser* with *parecer*, especially with regards to hygiene. Just like Saco’s or Calcagno’s nonfictional texts, González del Valle warns the reader not to equate good looks with health, or to assume that the physical reflects the moral. In this sense, Cuban texts anticipate the evolution of medical science toward a more nuanced, multifaceted view of the Self. In the novel, while Carmen and Adela met the Euro-Creole standards of beauty, wealth, and purity—which attract men, such as the narrator (if not the author<sup>35</sup>), they were clearly a menace to society. Their bodies hide signs of latent impurities, delicacies, and propensity toward disease. In addition, their anti-hygienic behavior belied any claims to their apparent flawlessness. So while they *appeared* to subscribe to the conventional norms of appearance and comportment, they were at essence—as the narrator identifies—a pair of souls sullied by more than just a casual brush with immorality. The incongruity between appearance and essence becomes problematic in racially heterogeneous societies like Cuba, where fear of the Other is projected onto those racialized—and not only gendered—as impure.

Third, both public hygiene and prose fiction reiterate that membership in the Cuban imagined community involves active and continual surveillance not only of one’s own behavior, but that of others as well. Since the campaign for public hygiene could not police every individual in Havana, it had to find ways to encourage the population to reproduce its methods of surveillance on a smaller scale. The novel seemed to provide a more effective, subtle means of instilling and reproducing individual self-discipline than did medical manuals or public health warnings. As literary critic Gabriella Nouzeilles affirms, narrative prose fiction appropriated medical discourse as a way to help reproduce the normalizing practices of its society (27). Even

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<sup>34</sup> For more on disease and narration in nineteenth century Latin America, see Gabriella Nouzeilles’ *Ficciones somáticas*, Michael Aronna’s *Pueblos Enfermos*, or Benigno Trigo’s *Subjects of Crisis*.

<sup>35</sup> González del Valle is one of those elite Euro-Creole guardians of Cuban hygiene for and by whom such norms have been constructed.

while it runs the risk of becoming what she calls a “destabilizing semiotic mechanism,” the novel still has a greater chance of success than the medical treatise.<sup>36</sup> As Sarmiento affirmed at mid-century, the act of reading novels helps control and redirect human passions in a productive way. Narrative fiction, in other words, was needed to supplement the incomplete discourse of public health. It needed to reach out to every individual in her home. Just like the latter, it operated as both an inclusionary and exclusionary mechanism, defining which individuals were fit to be part of the greater social body. “Mientras el impulso centrípido de una de [estas fuerzas contrarias] incorpora e incluye, creando así la comunidad horizontal de iguales de la que habla [Benedict] Anderson, el movimiento centrífugo de la otra expulsa del círculo de los elegidos a los que clasifica como peligrosos y enfermos” (Nouzeilles 24).

The narrator in the novel could be said to represent the socio-medical establishment—a textual embodiment of what the Nouzeilles calls a *vigilante* or neighborhood security guard—in that his concern with the girls does not limit itself to the investigation of their disease per se (39). Rather, his interests extend to other dimensions of their social experience, such as their daily lives and their interactions with their families. Just as it models self-care on a small scale, the novel encourages its readers to exercise the same kind of surveillance over their own neighbors—and indeed, over themselves. In this way, the novel acts as a counterpoint to the hygiene manual or the medical treatise: one could be read as the “espejo invertido” of the other (Nouzeilles 27). As Foucault’s model of Bentham’s panopticon affirms, the idea was that each individual would act as if s/he were being constantly watched (*Discipline* 200-5). Ideally, everyone would discipline her/his body in ways that were in accordance with the values of health and productivity.

But the differences between the novel and the nonfiction discourse of public hygiene are important. Said reminds us that any novelistic narrative, while it has for an immediate referent the act of speaking or writing (“dice que”), it is not obliged to be real except in the specific formal ways elaborated upon by Wayne Booth and others (*Beginnings* 87). Rather, the novel departs from the “real” in search of a new, or novel, sense of understanding or fulfillment. While all writing to some degree can be said to create a fiction in order to do this—since an absolute, material “truth has no need of words,”—the novel, more than other types of writing, recognizes itself as fiction (*Beginnings* 86). Inasmuch as it admits that “truth” can only be approached indirectly, through language, to that degree is fiction truth’s “ironic double” (86). Another way of putting it is to say that the novel spans the chasm between truth and its supplement, writing, just as the narrator mediates between (“true”) author and (fictional) written story. The narrator, in other words, is an embodiment of the authorial admission that the subject’s material being is not sufficient unto itself. The empirical subject needs to supplement itself through language, which of course is never enough to replace that (“truth”) which is already lost. “[F]iction alone speaks or is written” . . . “any absolute truth cannot be expressed in words, for only diminished, flawed versions of the truth are available to language” (*Beginnings* 86).

For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic (ie: self-aware fictional) repeating voice is always ironic, because it is aware of its limitations as a true author(ity). Instead of referring to an ultimate religious truth, the critic could speak in terms of the elusive concept of human freedom. If we operate on the assumption that there is no such thing as absolute subjective freedom, then all freedom is contingent upon something or someone else. Said explains it this way: “Insofar as an

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<sup>36</sup> “Los casos ejemplares que narran son espejos invertidos del manual de higiene ciudadana, mientras que sus finales espectaculares de lo monstruoso fijan la identidad visual de los sujetos indeseables que deben ser excluidos de la comunidad nacional” (27). In her book *Ficciones somáticas* Nouzeilles focuses on the *fin de siglo* Argentine novel.

author begins to write at all he is ironic, since for him [sic], too, there is a deceptive, subjective freedom at the outset” (88). This freedom, of course, is an illusion, because “[t]he real power (whether it be religious, scientific, philosophical, etc.) is elsewhere” (89). Said would agree with Marx that freedom, even in fiction, is a function of the interests of power, such as class, gender, race. The novel is perhaps more aware of this than other, especially non-fictional, genres. It can provide a temporary relief from pressures, but only by displacing them onto a fictional plane. Yet, perhaps due to its self-conscious irony, its casual, indirect, and perhaps sometimes cynical way of approaching the truth, fiction gets closer to what is “real” than does its nonfictional counterparts such as the science of medicine. As Said summarizes, the mediation that the novel engenders “paradoxically, because of its falseness, makes the truth truer” (*Beginnings* 90).

We recall that the novel uses imitation, or mimesis, to get close to the everyday lived reality of individuals. It emphasizes the particulars of a given situation, according a large “amount of attention to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment” (Watt 18). This particularization allows for an imagined, pleasurable intersubjective contact. This contact takes place both within the novelistic universe and between it and the “real life” reader. As we said before, meaning in the novel is contingent upon (contact with) the other subjects involved in the meaning-making process: the author, the narrator, the other characters, the reader. As Bakhtin theorizes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, one of its characteristics is “the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the *zone of maximal contact* with the present” (11) (my emphasis). This closeness, this realism, this intimacy between novelistic present and the material present is the exact kind of contact which so fascinates the purported guardians of Cuban hygiene. This contact is an important component of the novel as a genre. The formal realism of the novel creates a relatively safe space for a particular kind of exploration of contact, as well as an excavation of the subjectivities that inspire it. The novel opens up a fairly free narrative space that allows for all kinds of contact, the ongoing consequences of which, however, are unforeseeable to the writer.

I want to suggest that the narrator in *Carmen y Adela* experiences the kind of “contact with the present” that the author cannot. The narrator, an embodied subject in a fictional world full of other bodies, breaks into and enters the emotional life of two girls without their invitation. He penetrates a privat(ized) domain and exposes it to public scrutiny. He is able to enjoy a delicious, dangerous contact with them while the author escapes, supposedly uncontaminated and unharmed. The invented space of the novel allows the writer to investigate unsanctioned, unsavory, or even illicit topics that might otherwise implicate him in some more direct way. The process of writing enables him to get tantalizingly close to the intimacies of other subjects with whom he might not—in “real life”—deign to associate. It lets him reach out and touch, through the devious device of writing, those whom disease has rendered untouchable. And it allows him to safely explore the overwhelming similarities between himself and these Others without exposing his own body to contamination. For better or worse, nobody can escape the disease of contact via the written word. Far from being of “cadaverous rigidity,” it is alive and pulsating.

### **A Sanitized Society**

To decode the hidden puzzle of a female friendship bordering on homosocial desire is to rhetorically question which behaviors are abnormal for this society. To uncover the hidden vectors of pathologized affection is to discursively segregate the operational, healthy or hygienic body from the defective, diseased, or infected one. By highlighting their disease-inflected pronouncements of love, the author of *Carmen y Adela* links the cholera epidemic to

abnormalized conduct and unsanctioned contact. At the same time, he allows his narrator to hedonistically wallow, fully immersed, in both. By lingering on their intimate moments, the novel is still able to maintain its purpose of policing the public, and imparting a moral lesson, while simultaneously opening up a space for deviously pleasurable contact. By excavating the enigmatic zones of human emotion, González del Valle renders certain feelings, and the subjects to which they belong, unfit for life in a post-epidemic world. He can ritually expel these dangerous individuals from the nascent national body, while saying nothing about the other bodies that have voyeuristically enjoyed their intimate contact, their somatic “deviance,” and their demise.

Following Benedict Anderson’s persuasive argument about national community, deviant subjects such as Carmen and Adela are unfit to become proper<sup>37</sup> reproducers of *Cubanidad*. By using their bodies for practices contrary to the reproductive interests of the imagined future Cuban nation, they sacrifice their inclusion such a group. They can only be understood as defective, expunge-able members of society. The nineteenth century discourse of hygiene works to accomplish this purgation process, not only through medical accounts but also through the novel. Both social medicine and the novel try to identify a perceived threat to national integrity, and both use disease as a way to conceptualize this threat. Both attempt—with remarkable success—to abnormalize certain qualities and behaviors. As we have seen, this process goes far beyond categories of class or race. A medical document provides data about such disease, whether latent or visible. A fictional narrative translates this data into useful pedagogical information for the reader. But while medicine can diagnose the malady, treat it, and give a prognosis, a novel writer can choose how the story will end. In producing a realistic fiction of reality, it can deliver both excitement and instruction in one package. It can be at once sensational and didactic. A moral lesson is imparted, a reader’s role is imposed upon him, and normalizing practices reinforced, while the observer can revel in the pleasure of the narrative. Yet the novel is not always as tidy as it seems.

Emilio Bejel, in a book about Cuban sexuality, informs us that “...from its beginnings Cuban nationalist discourse has invested great effort in placing a series of controls and normalization mechanisms over certain bodies and their sexualities” (xxiii). In his study of Cuban homoerotic culture, he explores the island’s obsession with deviant socialities and sexualities. While he focuses on texts from the 1880s on, he accepts that homosexuality has been “a threat to the health of the body of the nation” since at least the late eighteenth century (xiii). However, his study deals primarily with effeminate (ie: impotent) male bodies, eliding the central importance of female sexuality in the continual reproduction of Cubanness. In contrast, this very issue is what the narrator of *Carmen y Adela* emphasizes in his disciplinary surveillance of two adolescent girls.

González del Valle’s narrator/*vigilante*, as a fictional subject, is composed of not just a medical eye but also a body. It can only affirm its owner’s inclusion in the imagined community of the disease-free by forcibly excluding other, ill, or unmanageable bodies. His distinction between normal and pathological is defined by the imaginary frontiers between his healthy, hygienic Self and its opposing unhealthy, unhygienic Other (Nouzeilles 21). If the narrator places himself inside the community of belonging, then the *coléricos*, the mad, the aberrant, or the excessively emotional are outside of that circle. However, there are some major problems with this formulation. One, the body is permeable and unstable, as is made apparent by the physical sensuality, illness, and death detailed so minutely here. Two, the narrator’s body, as any

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<sup>37</sup> I want to highlight the multiple connotations of this word as cleanly and hygienic as well as appropriate and correct.

subject's body, is not immune to desire. He desires his young female objects (subjects) of study. It seems that the process of writing about them unleashes (or creates) a desire that very nearly overtakes the narrator, whom we can see, if not the author, whom we cannot. Somebody takes perverse pleasure in reading their bodies as erotic texts. The desire that is exacerbated through the writing process jeopardizes del Valle's position as an authorial figure fully in charge of his text. Death is the only option for these unfortunate subjects, and it cannot come too soon. For a novel that purports to represent nature's cold justice and impart a moral lesson, these girls' lives have already been prolonged for far too long.

According to a traditional reading of desire in the novel, the pleasure that the narrator takes in their punishment is only a logical extension of nature's law, not an additional desire stirred up by the act of writing itself. It is only a normal reaction to the already perverse inclinations of others, not a compulsive fascination with creating and diagnosing the Other that intensifies with each description. To say the least, the story does not encourage a deconstruction of the narrator's (much less the author's) position. Rather, it shuts down debate by encouraging the sort of collective rubbernecking—indulging in the guilty pleasure of others' suffering—that tragedies tend to incite. While the latter is emphasized as a natural human tendency, any other form of desire is constructed as unnatural, even grotesque. Most particularly, there is no space for homosocial affect along the spectrum of acceptable emotions. In short, this *novela* does not permit us to question whether desire—of any kind—existed prior to its inscription in the text. Instead, it simply blames the girls for their unfortunate fate, immediately snuffing out all questions with the convenient plot sealer of death.

The bodies of the girls are a text with which the narrator wrestles, just as the novel is a text and a test for the writer and the reader, or all who come into contact with the written text. In his introduction to *Dissemination*, Derrida reminds us how agonizing an intimate experience with a text (in the broadest sense of the term) can be. He says,

There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the 'object,' without risking—which is the only chance of entering into the game, by getting a few fingers caught—the addition of some new thread (63).

His metaphors, both sexual and scientific, are as applicable to the narrator of *Carmen y Adela* as to any writer or reader. He cannot scrutinize them in a dispassionate, distanced light. The "physiology" of his criticism reveals him to be "touched" by his "objects" of scrutiny. This is not to hand all agency over to the protagonists as much as to say that it is impossible to read a character—as well as to write one—and escape untainted from the contamination of her charms.

We recall that Derrida identifies "writing" as a *pharmakon*, a drug or poison that leads one astray (71-2). While Socrates, in the scene Derrida describes, appears to associate the *pharmakon* with a material written text hidden under his disciple Phaedrus' cloak, Derrida—in reading of Plato—points out that nothing is as simple as it seems. In fact, not only is the signifier *pharmakon* left open to debate: it can signify both remedy and poison, "bad" spell or "good" charm. Derrida shows that Plato also deliberately multiplies its referent: the *pharmakon* is both the material "leaves" of text under Phaedrus' cloak, as well as the creative act of writing. Not only does Derrida collapse the difference in meaning between the "true knowledge" of logos represented by medical science and the "false knowledge" of myth represented by writing. He

also demonstrates that the act of writing (to say nothing of the seemingly opposed, passive act of reading) is productive of exquisite sensations both of pleasure and anguish. Since Derrida also collapses the difference between writing and reading, writer and reader, the sensations produced through these processes cannot be contained by any one subject, authorial, narrative, or critical. None, for Derrida, are “outside” the text.

If the *pharmakon* of writing is both medicine and poison, if it both cures a sickness and introduces a new one, then “it can worsen the ill instead of remedy it” (97). If the ill, or the “disease,” of which Derrida speaks can be defined in this novel as the latent fear of contracting a real disease such as cholera, then writing about this fear, however obliquely, will only increase the terror of contagion. (Derrida implicates the reader as well as the writer.) Even if the “disease” is classified as bad behavior or lack of moral probity, he implies that it is still contagious. In his view, “disease” reacts to the *pharmakon* by proliferating and spreading; its points of resistance, instead of being suffocated by writing, are reinforced and multiplied (101). So we could say that writing about the fear of cholera increases paranoia about contracting disease (or bad character), rather than consigning these fears to history.

But this novel, of course, is not simply about cholera or the fear of contracting cholera. It is not even about “Carmen” or “Adela,” its eponymous subjects, per se. If, as I would like to suggest, the “disease” that Derrida talks about can be defined here as the fear of the Other—which, following his logic, is never completely exterior to the Self, the writer or reader—then writing (and reading) only increases the fear. It infects the writer (reader) because the process of writing (or reading) only exacerbates a paranoia that may or may not have existed prior to its inscription in text. It infects the reader because it operates on her imagination and thus opens up a vast Pandora’s box of fantastical possibilities. If the fear of the Other (for example, Carmen) is not wholly exterior from its apparent opposite (say, the narrator), then the fear of the Other is actually a fear of the Self (as Other, or the Other within the Self). The part of the self that cannot be governed, that cannot be contained, is that part which writing tries to contain within a limited set of graphic signifiers. Writing attempts to expel the Other from the Self, but it never succeeds because the Other, as Derrida shows, helps constitute the Self. It is its “constitutive other” or “constitutive antagonist,” as Butler proposes. So writing only makes us more aware of the latent problem that we have—through writing—agitated. We fool ourselves, Derrida implies, by convincing ourselves that it can be fully killed off, because this disease infects us all. To imagine its death is to fantasize, to fictionalize. The abject Other is within us. The *extramuros* is *intramuros* (Derrida 133). Writing tries to constantly, continually stage this expulsion, but it never succeeds. Not only is writing by its very nature a copy of a copy, a replica of a replica, of the “real” that we imagine exists somewhere. Writing also engenders more of itself, thus giving birth to other fictions. The novel, at least, admits that it is a product of the imagination. But that does not make it any less desperate to pin down the Other. In the novels that follow *Carmen y Adela*, the fear of the Other grows in size and capability, while this Other assumes a more and more recalcitrant, and malignant persona as time goes on. She—it is nearly always a she—moves from Euro-Creole bourgeois citizens to other classes of people who cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered acceptable members of the Cuban family.

### **Conclusion: Tentative Meliorism**

Ultimately, it is important to note that the narrator of *Carmen y Adela* expresses a measured degree of optimism by writing off the “sad memories” of the cholera epidemic as pertaining only to that particular outbreak and thus as being relegated to a circumscribed—and

less civilized—past (120). He implies that in the future, the vast majority of individuals (including the voyeurs?) will mend their ways and free themselves from the pernicious bodily practices and behaviors that both engender and personify literal disease. At the heart of these behaviors is the enactment of a counterproductive desire that threatens to destabilize and unravel the precarious cohesion of the (Euro-Creole) social body. In eliminating undesirable bodies such as Carmen's and Adela's from the scene and, this novel does its part to sanitize the national body. The specter of unproductive desire was presumed to be enough to frighten the populace into submission to the “natural” laws of society. The novel attempts to redirect desire—in all its manifestations—toward the righteous cause of producing future generations of decorous, properly behaved citizens.

If biopolitics, or the control of life, was of primary concern to nationalistic and proto-nationalistic writers, there was no better place to focus their energy than on the control of the female body. Indeed, in this body lay the future of their societies. However, one crucial difference between early- to mid-century Cuba, specifically, and late-century Latin America, in general, was that the former focused on the possibility for reform through behavioral modifications, as we will see in the next story, whereas that by the second half of the century, abnormality was understood as genetically mandated and therefore not reversible. For 1830s Cuba, then, social impurities were still more about bodily practice than about bodily essence, and this belief gave Cuban society a sense of possibility for its future moral perfectibility.

## Chapter Three, “Remedying Disease”

### Introduction: Margin and Center

Ramón de Palma’s *El cólera en la Habana* (1838) opens with a dance on the first night of carnival, in late February of 1833. Angélica, the protagonist, has just arrived in Havana from “la ciudad de Cuba”—Santiago, the relatively isolated, less populated<sup>1</sup> settlement at the other end of the island. She is unused to the disorder of the festival in the capital city of Havana. Angélica is a study in contradictions: just like the cholera epidemic, she hails from the *extramuros* as a suspicious “forastera” insinuating herself into the heart of the porous Cuban social body (*El cólera* 76). Yet the angelic “linda cubana” incarnates *lo cubano* (49). She brings the vision of a romanticized agrarian past through the city walls into the urban space of Cuban modernity par excellence. Hailing from the “anachronistic space”<sup>2</sup> of the countryside, she resembles one of Rousseau’s “naturally” beautiful romanticized figures with “uncorrupted morals,” the pure embodiment of an earlier, more innocent time. To paraphrase Johannes Fabian, she has leapt from the “there and then” of the “Other” side of the island—the pre-modern or extra-historical time not simultaneous with the nation—to the “here and now” of the storyteller’s modern Havana. From a time not contemporary with either the other characters or the listeners, she has descended like a prehistoric angel onto present day earth. A visiting *joven peregrina*, she provides “a los hombres una idea de las bellezas celestiales” (48). But there is more to her than that.

At first glance, Angélica seems to metonymize a Cuba unblemished by the ugly taints of industrial modernity, international commerce, and corrupt colonial government. Like Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s Sab, she is the virtuous “raw material” that will constitute a future Cuban nation.<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of this urban novel, the land beyond Havana is figured as a safe, pristine space untouched by modern speculation and masquerades, by colonial decadence and decay. Critic José Luis Ferrer, for example, writes that in early Cuban narrative, “el espacio rural [es] el más resguardado de la contaminación de influencias externas y por lo tanto el más “puro” desde la perspectiva nacionalista-romántica” (386). Though Angélica is not exactly from the countryside—we never learn anything specific about her provenance—everything looks rural from the viewpoint of the Havana harbor, a huge port open to global commerce. The “country,” then, is defined as that which exists beyond the extremely heterogeneous urban body, that messy “hervidero de razas, etnias y culturas diferentes” (Ferrer 387). And thus, compared to the city, it somehow constitutes that which is “authentic,” autochthonous, unspoiled Cuban.

At the same time, Angélica, like any subject, has a body. Unlike other bodies in this story, hers represents the paradoxes that comprise her society. As Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger*, “[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” (115). Corporeal integrity, then, is directly related to social integrity. The city is a social body, and the individual its representative. In this story, Angélica will incarnate the complexities of a colonial Cuba struggling to be modern, whole, and self-reliant. In doing so, this text displays a profound concern with the enforcement of boundaries: biological, social, moral, and racial.

As Mary Douglas tells it, a person “who comes back from these inaccessible regions [beyond the confines of the polity] brings with him [sic] a power not available to those who have

<sup>1</sup> Eastern Cuba at this time is less racially mixed, but it is socially infused with former (white Creole) Haitian-French plantation owners.

<sup>2</sup> Anne McClintock defines anachronistic space as “prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity” (40). Here, this space is not depicted negatively, but rather romanticized.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosa 2005. I believe that Michael Aronna also speaks of people as “raw material/s.”

stayed in the control of themselves and of society” (95). Thus rural zones are associated with a lack of self-discipline, state regulation, or general order. While the nearby countryside is not inaccessible to residents of Havana, the romantic image of *lo rural*—most especially the *Oriente*<sup>4</sup>—holds sway over the urban imagination. Whether the Oriente is figured as a mysterious veiled Other, a dangerous contact zone with other parts of the Caribbean, or simply a peaceful area of natural serenity, the far eastern side of the island is relatively unknown for the majority of Cubans in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, a journey there from Havana could easily take two weeks (Carpentier, *Music* 151). City walls are meant to protect Havana from what Ferrer calls “outside influence,” meaning the pernicious modern forces of Other societies, from Haiti or the United States, Spain or Europe. In this case, however, “outside influence” comes from the unknown, relatively uninhabited “interior space” of the island, a place much more imaginary than concrete for most urban dwellers (383). Here, *lo externo* inheres in the countryside. This is problematic for any representation of Angélica, who has qualities of both native and transplant, insider and *Ausländer*. While on the one hand she seems innocuous and bland, something about her is uncanny and unsettling. She is an interstitial figure who is equally a power for good as well as a carrier of creative destruction. She may encompass what Douglas ironically calls a “free-lance benign contagion,” bringing good fortune to the polity only after a violent reconfiguration of its limits (109).

Paradoxically, Angélica incarnates both purity and impurity, innocence and danger, disease and its cure. In one sense, she represents “a movement from outside to inside, from margin to center,” just like the literal contagion in Julio Ramos’ 1994 cholera study (“Citizen” 180). She is an intruder, an *extranjera*,<sup>5</sup> a marginal character vis-à-vis the tight urban social system. Yet she also brings the “center” with her. Angélica embodies the complexities of the multifaceted Cuban self. The “center” of Cuba—if there is one—follows her around like a magnet. The narrator makes this abundantly clear in his repeated references to her as “linda cubana” and “joven cubana” throughout his tale (49, 52, 57, 99). If it is true that, as Ferrer claims, the Cuban novel began as a rural narrative and later migrated to an urban setting, then Angélica embodies this evolution (345-445). Although there is no rural space to speak of in this novel, the association of Angélica with the nature and purity of the countryside—in contrast with the artificiality and corruption of the city—constantly evokes the revered space whence “true” *Cubanidad* springs.

“To have been at the margins,” says Douglas, “is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power” (97). Angélica, thus, can be understood as a liminal figure, or even an embodiment of the paradoxical *pharmakon*. She is both prototypical Cuban and suspicious outsider, both catastrophic and contagious, both powerful and peaceful. This chapter will examine the instability and uncertainty at the core of early Cuban narrative representation. Angélica’s story is ultimately a heartening one—of survival in the face of adversity, of steadfastness in the midst of choleric chaos. Despite her gentle airs, she will be a hale and hearty mother for the Euro-Creole community that constitutes the early Cuban imaginary. In this early example of an embryonic Cuban novel, the future of society centers on the characteristic duality and immunity of the robust Cuban female archetype.

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<sup>4</sup> Neither a precise region nor a specific province, the *Oriente* has always been used to refer to the eastern half of the island.

<sup>5</sup> This is better expressed in the French *étranger*, meaning at once a foreigner, an outsider, an unfamiliar person, a stranger.

## Nation and the Novel

If the representation of the nation is a temporal process, as Homi Bhabha argues, then this is one of its first iterations (*Location* 204). *El cólera en la Habana* is often considered to be one of the first “foundational fictions” to be produced in Cuba.<sup>6</sup> A Romantic-*costumbrista* hybrid, it melds a timeless love story with local history and habits, blending notions of universality with a uniquely Cuban specificity. It creates an image of Cuba through what Bhabha terms “the disclosures of its everyday life;...the telling details that emerge as metaphors for [what will only much later be characterized as “national”] life (*Location* 204). In a quick summary of the story, the narrator frets about the fate of a young maiden thrown into misfortune’s midst. (At the same time, she and cholera arrive simultaneously, hinting at the possibility that she might have brought in the contagion herself.) Fortunately, the damsel in distress survives cholera’s rampage and ends up, happily ever after, married to the white Creole gentleman of her dreams. Unfortunately, this man, Jacinto, a withered aristocrat and foppish scaredy-cat, is but a poor excuse for the dashing *caballero* one might have hoped for. The novel allegorically depicts the sensible union of disparate populations—rural, urban—as reflected in the romantic pairing of two young lovers from distinct geo-social backgrounds: Angélica represents the agrarian *terrateniente*; Jacinto the citified bourgeois. According to Doris Sommer, the successful courtship can be read as an attempt to suture the elaborate fissures within Cuba’s ruling classes, naturalize the island as the geographically ideal imaginary community, and inspire romantic attachment to Cuba as a unique socio-cultural entity. Sommer’s influential study, *Foundational Fictions*, showed this to be the case in several other Latin American nations-to-be.

Yet the novel is much more equivocal than this. It is by no means uniformly approbatory of the urban upper middle classes—the so-called bourgeoisie—who will constitute this new Cuba. It exposes the vulnerability of the pillars of this society. As we have seen in the parentheses above, it constantly alludes to the cracks in the edifice it is constructing. Like Palma’s first novel, *Una pascua en San Marcos*, which overtly laments the “moral malleability” of the urban bourgeoisie, *El cólera en la Habana* is a critique of his own society (Ferrer 305). Like *Una pascua*, the novel upbraids the Habanese population for its childlike vanity and hypocritical behavior in the face of epidemic disaster. During the cholera outbreak that drives this novel’s plot, even the most proper, upstanding bourgeois citizens think only of saving themselves, not their neighbors, from the plague. Among the *medrosos* one cannot exclude Jacinto,<sup>8</sup> who himself is practically paralyzed by fear (62, 67). *El cólera*... thus exhorts its readership to grow up, so to speak, and assume the mantle of responsibility for a collective Cuban social conscience. Despite the harshness of its critique, the novel ends on a hopeful note.

Cuban society at this moment is by no means cohesive enough to produce what we would now call a “national” or even proto-national novel. Although some critics<sup>9</sup> do use these terms, it would be anachronistic to impose such labels retroactively on the literary products of the late 1830s, when Cuba, still a Spanish colony, was not yet fully a nation in the modern sense. From the Latin root of the verb “to be born,” the term “nation” originally referred to a group of people

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<sup>6</sup> Depending on one’s criteria, there exist various possibilities for the “first” Cuban “novel.” It could be Palma’s historical fiction *Matanzas y Yumurí* (1837) or his later *Una pascua en San Marcos* (1838). Cirilio Villaverde’s *El espetón de oro* (1838) was the first text published in book form (Fornet 112). Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s *Francisco* (1839), however, is now considered to be the first modern novel “propriadamente dicha” (Ferrer 324).

<sup>8</sup> As Julia Chang has pointed out, the name Jacinta/o (hyacinth) refers to the color purple, and thus, to the importance of aristocratic origins. See Ch. 3 of her dissertation, “From Castus to Casticismo.” Because *El cólera*... mocks and critiques the Cuban sugarocracy, Palma’s choice for his “wealthy” and “decent” hero’s name is likely ironic (52). It should be noted that Palma does not differentiate between the haute bourgeoisie and the wealthy sugar barons: both are subjected to equally scathing reviews.

<sup>9</sup> See Méndez Rodenas, Ivan Schulman, José Luis Ferrer and Lorna Williams, among others.

born on common soil, and united by a common language, culture, family, or lineage. According to Barbara Fuchs, “nation” in pre-modern European usage could refer to religion, culture, or even what would later be called “race.”<sup>10</sup> In modern times, it refers to an aggregate of communities united by something which they hold in common; in Cuba’s case, this is primarily a geographical territory. However, in 1832, the idea of a cohesive national culture was still in embryonic form. Indeed, what was called a “novela cubana” by one publisher<sup>11</sup> in 1836 could not be equated with a “national” but rather a regional or even provincial<sup>12</sup> novel, much like Fernán Caballero’s *La Gaviota* (1849) in Spain. However, the written discourse of this era does contain, according to José Luis Ferrer, “los elementos fundamentales a partir de los cuales la novela cubana podía comenzar a crecer” (296).<sup>13</sup> The short Cuban novels of the late 1830s and early 1840s—along with a corresponding corpus of literary criticism<sup>14</sup>—might be said to create a national image in chrysaline form. Together, they compose what Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls “el momento de emergencia de los discursos nacionales” (“Cirilio Villaverde” 1).

Beginning with pseudo-scientific narratives of *lo rural* (in stories such as Villaverde’s *Una excursión a Vueltabajo*, 1838), and culminating in fictional-scientific narratives of *lo urbano* (like his *La joven de la flecha de oro*, 1840), the novels create what Régis Debray calls the “founding gesture of any human society” (Bhabha, *Nation* 51). But while this nation-building impulse cannot be denied,<sup>15</sup> equally important is the ambivalent nature of this foundational energy. Bhabha uses this term to refer to a “nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population” (212). But this energy is present long before anything resembling a nation is formed. On the one hand, this force is inclusive and centripetal, to paraphrase Argentine critic Gabriela Nouzeilles; it is a movement of generous incorporation of a collection of multifarious elements (24). On the other hand, this community-building energy is exclusive and centrifugal, expelling “...del círculo de los elegidos a los que clasifica como peligrosos y enfermos” (24). Like dueling but complementary laws of physics, neither of these forces can exist without the other. They reveal a contradictory core, the pathological or even self-destructive pulsation at the heart of human societies.

The social effects of cholera exemplify these contradictory pulsations. Cholera provides the motor for Ramón de Palma’s story. As a timely natural disaster, the epidemic disrupts the putrefactive old order of things. The brief pause in all social activity that it creates in its wake provides an opportunity, if not for social redemption, then at least for a reconfiguration of the acceptable limits of the social body. After the passage of this unwelcome turbulence, the decimated city becomes a more salubrious backdrop for the newly hygienic actions of its sobered but invigorated inhabitants. Parasitic, superfluous, or atavistic members of society have been eliminated; only those capable of self-discipline and positive example have survived. People learn the hard way that a well-ordered social body, like a hygienic human body, must comprise individual self-regulation as well as mutual surveillance. Literature captures the allure of this orderly fiction. As José Martí would write later in the century, natural disasters (like epidemics)

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<sup>10</sup> See Fuchs’ *Exotic Nation*.

<sup>11</sup> In that year the Imprenta del Gobierno published *Ricardo Leyva o una muerte a tiempo, una novela cubana*, by Francisco de Paula Serrano. Needless to say, this publisher would not have considered this a “national” Cuban novel. It is only in retrospect that we see it as an example of Cuban—rather than regional Spanish—patriotism.

<sup>12</sup> In 1837, the Cortes ruled that Spain’s few remaining colonial territories would no longer be considered provinces; consequently, they would lose their right to legislative representation.

<sup>13</sup> Ferrer breaks down the years 1836-1841 into three distinct stages of what he calls “el desarrollo de la narrativa cubana” (296). See Ch. 6, especially pp. 290-329.

<sup>14</sup> For the clearest examples of early Cuban criticism of the novel, see Domingo Del Monte’s “La novela histórica” (1832), José María Heredia’s “Ensayo sobre la novela” (1832), and, above all, Ramón de Palma’s “La novela” (1838).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Anderson, Bhabha, or Saïd; for Cuba, Ferrer, Ramos, or Schulman.

conveniently spur cultural renaissance and renewal. An earthquake, for instance, upsets a decadent *ancien régime* and creates a new, clean, hygienic space for (often literal) rebirth. Like the biblical flood, the trope of natural disaster works to figuratively cleanse the surface of the earth, wiping away the residual grime of the old order and preparing the soil for renewed growth.<sup>16</sup>

The fictional rendering of epidemic disaster as shown in *El cólera en la Habana* can be useful in imagining an orderly social body, be it a full Spanish colony or an independently minded province. Illness is a particularly suitable motif for the promotion of its opposite, a healthily functioning social body. As always, a given element is best represented by its (supposed) antonym. Cuba, of course, is an important member of Spain's elaborate and globally expansive (through rapidly shrinking) imperial body.<sup>17</sup> In socio-racially complex Cuba, even more than on the European continent, epidemic sickness—as we have seen in Chapter One—has particular symbolic resonance. Julio Ramos remarks that after the 1833 episode of cholera in Cuba, disease (in particular) replaces disaster (more generally) as “the privileged object of discourse on social reform,” the paradoxical “founding trope of an emergent national symbolic order” (“Citizen” 182). While Cuba is far from being considered a national entity in 1833, cholera's biomedical discursive apparatus spawns an incipient Cuban—as differentiated from national—imaginary. That is to say, illness becomes the literal and metaphorical basis upon which the idea of Cuba as a distinct geo-cultural entity begins to grow and spread.

Based on concepts of purity and hygiene, the language of disease, disorder, rehabilitation, and reorder overflows with race, class, and even gendered connotations. In fact, according to Palma's representation, destruction of the old, the putrid, the barren and the disease-withered helps bring about not only fertility and new growth, but gradual social maturity and social wisdom as well. With *El cólera...*, Palma implies that the rosy, fecund future depicted in his story would not have been possible without a devastating but timely reduction of Cuba's frivolous, corrupt bourgeoisie. The story of decimation is supported by demographic facts,<sup>18</sup> but the intimacy of the narrative account is meant to cause cathartic reactions, passionate engagement, and even romantic attachment to the communal destiny of this most special island, la “Fidelísima.”<sup>19</sup>

### Dance, Music, and Masks

Angélica is the only female at the ball without a mask. She appears to eschew the obvious tomfoolery of the carnival masquerade. In addition, she steadfastly maintains her virtuous, maidenly decorum. Unwilling to participate in visual or verbal trickery, she seems as trusting of others as she looks trustworthy herself—especially in comparison to the plethora of suspicious disguises. The other dancers' carnival attire, in contrast, visually veils the corrupt reality of a debased metropolis literally on the brink of plague.<sup>20</sup> Upper class appearances, Palma seems to

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<sup>16</sup> Martí encapsulates his view in the fictional-scientific image, quite germane to Palma's story, of multiple human births after a terrible earthquake: “Y rien todavía en la plaza pública, a los dos lados de su madre alegre, los dos gemelos que en la hora misma de la desolación nacieron bajo una tienda azul” (*El terremoto del Charleston*, Obras completas IV, 298). With its emphasis on hygienic reproduction, this metaphor exhorts all members of a well-ordered social body to go forth and procreate, thus harnessing their sexuality to a useful communal endeavor.

<sup>17</sup> Although most of Latin America had gained political independence by 1830, the Spanish empire still included Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam.

<sup>18</sup> More than 8,000 people (out of a population of 120,000) died in two months. See López-Denis, Ch.s 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> It was a common belief among Euro-Creoles that Cuba was a specially blessed place, particularly when compared to other Caribbean islands. As Angélica's mother says in *El cólera...*, “...no se puede negar que la Santísima Virgen nos ha mirado siempre con predilección, pues nunca hemos sufrido las calamidades de otros pueblos” (59).

<sup>20</sup> The first death from cholera was reported on February 24, 1833, days after the carnival dance depicted in this tale. See López-Denis, Ch. 5, for a fascinating account of the cholera story.

be saying, are but a mask for unhygienic interiors. While on the surface all may appear to be happy and harmonious, a latent immorality weakens the city's—as well as its subjects'—most handsome edifice. Soon it is revealed that moral and physical sickness—made manifest by the cholera epidemic—putrefies the city from within its walled borders.

In contrast to the disdainful airs of the other, more typical young women—“aquellas mujeres con quienes la naturaleza ha sido avara de sus dones, y que deberían adoptar el partido de hacerse amables, en vez de vituperar las ajenas gracias”—Angélica is the only one who, apparently, has nothing to hide (*El cólera* 49). In her, unlike in the others, handsome appearance and wholesome essence are essentially congruent. With her, what you see is what you get. If the old Spanish proverb *No basta con serlo, hay que parecerlo* applies to Angélica, her impeccable looks are the proverbial icing on the cake of an honorable soul. While fixed identities in Havana are a fiction symbolized here by the overabundance of slippery, removable carnival masks, Angélica seems to exude the honesty and truth of unflinching transparency. Indeed, her story is simple, her genealogy (apparently) complete. She comes to the city under the protection of her mother to legally claim (“recoger”) her rightful inheritance (50). She is the epitome of truth, fairness, and justice. Prior to her arrival in Havana, she is uncontaminated by the social, racial, and political infighting that plagues city life. Her mere presence evokes the idyllic rural space as represented in pastoral narratives already familiar to Habanese readers.

Yet Angélica also introduces something extraordinary into the social scene. An uncanny presence, she is familiar and yet not. As a “forastera” in the city, her body actually masks what Terry Eagleton, in this case referring to urban dwellers' bodies, calls “a whole impenetrable hinterland of experience” (145). Upon reflection, we actually have no knowledge of her origin, where she has been, or what she has done, before her entry onto this particular narrative stage. “Por ahí han dado en llamarla ‘la linda cubana:’ no tengo otro informe de su genealogía” says one admirer (49). Yet there is no doubt that she is prototypically Cuban. She looks Cuban; she speaks like a Cuban; most importantly, she moves like a Cuban woman. With her enigmatic character, Palma introduces the (in)famous trope of the dance into Cuban fiction. Arriving on the first night of carnival, her presence is inextricable from the music and the dance.

In Alejo Carpentier's 1944 short story *Oficio de tinieblas*, music itself is a zone of contamination. While there is no agential protagonist in his baroque tale, the music and the dance themselves are the source of contact, and thus, of contagion. Instruments and musicians alike become infected through proximity to the dance: “Pero ahora, la enfermedad alcanzaba los pianos... [Todos los instrumentos] conocieron... el contagio de la maldita danza” (89). Contagion, however, is not just a metaphor. In Carpentier's story, the dance creates a temblor which spawns a cholera epidemic. In a perverse way, the contagion of the dance provokes first disaster, destruction, and then renewal.

At the beginning of Carpentier's narrative, the city is dying.<sup>21</sup> Everything is rotting, molding, or fading. The carnival season begins with great sadness. One character, Burgos, decides to form a band. Suddenly, the couplet of a folk song, coming to animated life, floats inexplicably over the rooftops. Then, it becomes contagious: “Sin poderlo remediar, el maestro de música de la catedral marcó el compás con el pie derecho” (90). From there, music and musicians proliferate without explanation. Soon, everything begins to dance. This provokes a great earthquake, followed by a cholera epidemic, in which many people, including Burgos, die and are placed in a mass grave. At the end, the life cycle begins anew. Sunflowers grow on the grave-posts. Children play, the air becomes lighter, bells ring, and even snails sing. The chaos of

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<sup>21</sup> Carpentier chose Santiago for the setting of his story, where the Cuban carnival tradition began.

carnival gave way to collapse, which in turn made room for a burgeoning new social configuration. In Carpentier's story "el contagio de la maldita danza," which functions as Mary Douglas' "free-lance benign contagion," becomes a form of creation, procreation, and even recreation. It is not a malignant but rather a beneficent force.

In contrast, the dance in Palma's more traditional novel is not named as the source of disaster, though one character, the well-intentioned doctor, does blame cholera on carnival: "Ése es el fruto que se saca de las máscaras" (*El cólera* 60). Rather, in his novel Palma hints at the possibility that dance breeds the kind of contact on which disease thrives. Contagion is a metaphor for bodies that are impossible to police, something that caused many a bourgeois subject much anxiety. While the bodies here are all white and middle class, things are not always what they seem, especially during carnival, when norms are often reversed. Angélica, one of these circulating bodies, *seems* innocuous and pure but in fact may not be. Perhaps her lack of fixity<sup>22</sup> is the reason why she is so entrancing to narrator and reader. "Peregrina," "encantadora," suspicious, and seductive, she can only be compared to the hybridized Cuban music<sup>23</sup> that finally ushers her out onto the dance floor and into our field of vision (*El cólera* 48-9).

The *baile* of the Sociedad Filarmónica, according to Jacinto Salas y Quiroga's observations, is the top tier of three nineteenth century dance societies (*Viajes* 134). All are regulated according to class, but men are less bound by these rules than women:

Las que pertenecen a la aristocracia, no concurren sino a la *sociedad filarmónica*; a la *habanera* y de *Santa Cecilia* no van mas que señoras de la segunda y tercera clase. Los hombres concurren a las tres... (134).

Men were entitled to much more fluidity of cross-class and cross-race movement than women. Jorge Ángel Hernández, reviewing Salas y Quiroga's *Viajes*, remarks that "las tres escalas reseñadas responden responden mucho más a cuestiones de rango dentro de un mismo espectro clasista, que a divisiones de clase" (1). Thus, while a far cry from the mixed-race *bailes de cuna* as depicted by the likes of Cirilio Villaverde,<sup>24</sup> these dance societies are still problematic sites of representation and fixity, to say the least. Not only is proper rank thrown into question, but a distinctly Spanish Caribbean—and in Salas y Quiroga's mind, exotic/erotic—tinge marks them as peculiarly Cuban:

Hay algo de dulce, de suave, de parecido al carácter del país; la música parece un continuado suspiro amoroso; los compases, movimientos de una sílfide que se columpia en los aires, y su interminable repetición se asemeja al cansancio del placer, al círculo que traza el que no puede arrancarse de un sitio (140).

This unnameable "algo de dulce" might be defined, more specifically, by the "muelles movimientos de una bella cubana, danzando una antigua contradanza española, traducida algún

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<sup>22</sup> Homi Bhabha defines fixity as "the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism... It connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (94). I want to suggest that Angélica, and perhaps the Cuban body in general, embodies both (the appearance of) fixity and its lack.

<sup>23</sup> Known outside of Cuba as the *habanera*, the *contradanza* or *danza criolla* was the first Cuban dance form to gain international renown. Originating partially from the eighteenth century European *contredanse*, it was introduced to Cuba by French colonists fleeing Haiti at the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Peter Manuel, the Cuban *contradanza* was based on West African rhythms. It so dominated the early nineteenth century Cuban music scene that nearly all composers of the era worked with it at some point. See Alejo Carpentier's *Music in Cuba*, especially Chs. 6-8.

<sup>24</sup> The *bailes de cuna*, according to Villaverde, "se daban en tiempo de ferias, que en ellos tenían entrada franca los individuos de ambos sexos de la clase de color, sin que se le negase tampoco a los jóvenes blancos que solían honrarlos con su presencia" (*Cecilia Valdés* 95).

tanto al sistema de su naturaleza tropical” (Salas y Quiroga 140). It is unclear whether it is the dance or the woman that is the cause of such woozy poeticization, but this differentiation hardly seems to matter, since both are conflated in the following passage:

Para mí nada hay preferible a una muelle, lánguida, voluptuosa contradanza española. Herencia de nuestros padres, yo la desconocía; la primera vez que la vi bailar fue en las Antillas; confieso que me pareció más poética que nuestros fríos, sosos, e insípidos rigodones (140).

He might as well say the same of the dancers themselves.

For his part, Ramón de Palma’s mention of the *contradanza* as Angélica’s first dance with Jacinto encapsulates the complexity of what would become the trope of the dance scene. The *contradanza*, originally an English and later a French country dance, was brought to the island of Hispaniola via the French colonists. After the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century, many of these settlers fled to Santiago de Cuba, bringing their Gallicized *contredanse* with them. Soon, the Cubanized *contradanza* developed into two distinct genres. One, more Africanized in rhythm, survived in the Cuban Oriente; the other, more closely related to the European style, dominated the Havana music scene.<sup>25</sup> Angélica’s *Santiaguera* provenance may in fact be a mischievous allusion to what some Cubans would call her “French black” roots (Carpentier, *Music* 148-49). While there is no overt reference to Haiti, slavery, or revolution in this novel, the *contradanza* surreptitiously introduces these heterogeneous socio-political elements into the story.

In 1809, an editorial in the *Aviso de La Habana* worried about foreign, especially French, influences on the so-called “honest simplicity” of the Spanish Cuban populace:

French libertinism [has] conquered our compatriots...inflicting great harm on our ancient customs. Now that we detest with all our heart the principles of that degraded nation...why are we not going to feel odd with the *balsa* and the *contradanza*, always indecent inventions that diabolical France has introduced in our midst? They are, in their essence, diametrically opposed to Christianity: they are made up of gestures, lascivious wiggling, and an impudent ruffianism that provoke, like concupiscence, heat and fatigue in the body (Carpentier, *Music* 151).

The article stands out for its focus not only on defining the French Other as an incidental way of consolidating a Cuban bourgeois identity. It also betrays an profound anxiety about the (un)governability of the individual body in motion and the unmanageable desires that this body might unleash. Setting aside the possibility that the mention of the “diabolical” French could be a veiled reference to the unspeakable memory of the Haitian Revolution and the racial paranoia it inspired, the article’s focus on the overwhelmingly fleshy sensuality of the body is remarkably revealing. Foreign libertinism, lasciviousness, and libidinous desire, embodied in the infamous French, constitute everything that is antithetical to upright and hygienic *Cubanidad*. Thus the editorial, while focused on the demonization of the French, also betrays what Carpentier calls a

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<sup>25</sup> Carpentier writes: “In the days when a trip from Havana to Santiago was a fifteen-day adventure (or more), it was possible for two types of *contradanza* to coexist: one closer to the classical pattern, marked by the spirit of the minuet, which later would be reflected in the *danzón*, by way of the *danza*; the other, more popular, which followed its evolution begun in Haiti, thanks to the presence of the “French blacks” in eastern Cuba. Because, when speaking of the Cuban *contradanza*, one must not forget that two parallel and different types existed during the first half of the nineteenth century: Santiago’s and Havana’s. See *Music in Cuba*, Ch. 6., p. 151.

certain “colonial chauvinism” on the part of the writer (*Music* 151). Here, this might more accurately be called *Cuban* chauvinism, as it is an early example of a growing proto-patriotism that will be more subtly—and perhaps more effectively—displayed in the novel. But patriotism’s first concern—after the denigration of the French/black/foreign Other—is the deliberate surveillance, regulation, and control of its own members’ individual bodies within the larger, greater social body.

I should note here that I use the words patriotism and proto-nationalism with extreme reluctance and caution, and for absolute lack of a more suitable set of terms. Of course, Cuba in the early nineteenth century was no more than an overseas province of Spain. Many elite Spaniards, such as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and the members of the Del Monte group, traveled back and forth from mainland Spain to Cuba with some regularity. While it is tempting to look back at the generation of the 1830s and claim that their work was nationalistic or proto-patriotic in outlook, it would be historically inaccurate to do so. However, it is also clear in retrospect that this was the first generation to express a Spanish regionalism firmly rooted in a particularly Cuban specificity.<sup>26</sup> Thus I use the terms “patriotic” or “proto-nationalistic” to refer to a certain pride of place peculiarly harbored by those *criollos*, born and educated on the island of Cuba,<sup>27</sup> who were emotionally, imaginatively or imaginarily connected with no other home (or “community,” as Anderson would say). Ramón de Palma and Cirilio Villaverde, as amply identified in their early writings, are two such men.<sup>28</sup>

Cirilio Villaverde, who—in his late-century descriptions in *Cecilia Valdés* of the Sociedad Filarmónica, expands upon Palma’s early narrative portrait—agrees that the dance is marked by an obsessive focus on elegant style rather than depth, on appearance rather than essence. For better or worse, the activity of the dance functions as a microcosm of Cuban social existence. For Villaverde, in his 1882 version of the book, “el baile es el pueblo, . . . y no hay ninguno como la danza que pinte más al vivo el carácter, los hábitos, el estado social y político de los cubanos, ni que esté en más armonía con el clima de la Isla” (*CV* 232). It is as if Villaverde personifies the dance as the discrete but flirtatious charmer who holds the key to Cuba’s identity. In fact, in Eduardo Ezponda’s pseudo-scientific 1878 study on “La mulata,” the mixed-race woman—the sensuous *cubana* par excellence—is the dance personified, incarnate, embodied in the flesh. La mulata is the celebrated but demonized creator of the *la danza cubana*. At once local and obscure, familiar and foreign, the dance reveals the contradictory mix of Cuban and colonial hierarchies, anxieties, and aspirations. Most of all, it concentrates the essence of Cuba into one single sweeping somatic movement.

Although the Sociedad Filarmónica is always filled with the upper crust of society, “lo más granado y florido de la juventud cubana de ambos sexos,” as Villaverde affirms, much of what looks like “la elegancia y la belleza de la Habana” only “passes” as proper (*CV* 229, 224, 227). The dance appears pure, hygienic, but something about it is at heart excessive, unsanitary—this is the same “thing” that attracts Salas y Quiroga. Perhaps in the confusion of the masks, a dancer might mix with the wrong person, the wrong crowd, by accident or by design. Not only, as mentioned above, is half of society (the male half) permitted to physically cut across class/rank lines, participating in more than one dance society and thus adding social uncertainty to the mix. In addition, these dances often become the sites of deliberate disguise and dissemblance. Thus they are fascinating and frightening to the writers who struggle to represent

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<sup>26</sup> See Schulman’s Prologue to the 1981 version of *Cecilia Valdés*, Ed. Ayacucho.

<sup>27</sup> *Criollo* comes from the Latin verb *criare*, to raise or to educate. See Lewis 63.

<sup>28</sup> José Luis Ferrer writes that Palma’s and Villaverde’s work in 1837 constituted the very first appearance of Cuban narrative. A second stage in the Cuban novel’s evolution also involved these two young gentlemen. See pp. 295-97 of “Novela y Nación.”

them. I want to suggest that the dance scene might be an early introduction to the theme of incest, explored more thoroughly in *Cecilia Valdés*, but already present in 1830s novels like *Petrona y Rosalía* and *Francisco*. In a society so full of duplicity, and in a room so crowded with moving bodies disguised by masks, one could hardly tell close relatives from prospective suitors—and not infrequently, these categories overlapped. The trope of the dance—and especially that of the masquerade ball—both hides and exposes this somatic excess. Of course, the dancers often capitalize on this confusion. In 1800s Havana, even the rich and the finely dressed were no more than very determined social climbers in a porous colonial system only passing as rigid and stable. Even the most important families in Havana, many of whom aspired to (and did) become titled nobility under the Spanish crown, were anxious to distinguish themselves visually—through their renowned “gusto,” “finura,” and “porte decente”—from the less fortunate, less well-connected, and perhaps less racially “pure” classes (*CV* 222). This is shown to be an all but impossible task. Palma’s dance floor may be the “soberbio estrado” where “la elegancia y la hermosura” reign supreme, but the excessively brilliant splendor of clothing, accessories and salon decorations can be read as a visual mark of intense socio-racial anxiety as well as a lack of clear class/race distinction (*El cólera* 47, *CV* 222). The “loca juventud” are as concerned as their elders to show their flawless form: one young musician, Ramón Montalvo, “en la flor de su edad,” says Villaverde, is “bello como un inglés de la más pura sangre”—rhetorically implying that he is neither English nor pure-blooded (*CV* 230, 226). The dance is thus a space of intense posturing and politesse in the midst of a firmly mixed-race society. But it is also a dangerous place of somatic instability, infirmity, and fluctuation. In the midst of this miasmatic morass of bodily mixing —“no había títere con cabeza...que no estuviera en el baile”—no participant (including the narrator) is free from contact or contagion (*El cólera* 47). Rather, seemingly clear boundaries of identity—of origin, race, class, and even gender—become blurred and obscured as bodies become pleasurably but sinfully tangled together. In the dance the idea of segregated racial purity is truly liquidated. Villaverde remarks with nostalgia on the psychosomatic satisfaction of this sensuous, sexual (con)fusion:

No es aquello bailar, puesto que el cuerpo sigue meramente los compases; es mecerse como en sueños, al son de una música gemidora y voluptuosa, es conversar íntimamente dos seres que se atraen mutuamente, y que el tiempo, el espacio, el estado, la costumbre ha mantenido alejados (*CV* 232).

For a psychoanalyst, the mo(ve)ment of the dance could be read as a brief, luxurious return to the pre-verbal state of supposedly blissful existence inside the womb. In this dream-world, racial and sexual and gender taxonomies do not yet exist. Somatic contact is not yet defined as positive or negative, essential or excessive. Everyone is literally melded together in one great throbbing mass. The individual melds with its Other as if the Other were (still) fused with its Self. This dreamlike state, like death, is also a great equalizer of artificially imposed hierarchies. Social differences of color and custom, space and place, black, white or mestizo no longer matter. For Villaverde as for Palma, the dance is representative of the amalgam that necessarily takes place in an urban setting. It can also be read, even more provocatively, as a euphemism for (hetero)sex itself, *la petite mort*, sexual pleasure and procreation, that most intimate and necessary act of community building. If the novel is an embryo of a national consciousness, then the dance is the process of insemination. Alas, this joyous unity, Nouzeilles’ centripetal force of inclusion, lasts only the daydreamer’s space of a moment.

Palma's brief foray into the enigmatic world of the dance is a precursor to Villaverde's more elaborate examination in *Cecilia Valdés* or Carpentier's baroque depiction in *Oficio de tinieblas*. But *El cólera en la Habana* is the beginning of a centuries-long exploration of *el baile* as promoter of cross-class breaches, hybridized identities, and luxurious imaginings.<sup>30</sup> In *El cólera...*, both the dance and its focus-object, the woman, are surrounded by a peculiar "no sé qué de encanto," an intriguing rhetorical question mark that is uniquely Cuban yet uniquely confusing (48). Unfortunately for the author who attempts to pin her down in writing, Angélica is nearly impossible to represent. The *joven cubana* doesn't lack admirers, but "...lo particular era que ninguno de ellos la conocía" (48). Not only does no one know her (*conocer*); they (or the narrator) are also incapable of rationally describing her (*saber*). She is very nearly unrepresentable. The girl seems trustworthy, and yet something about her (origin? race? sex? gender?) is elusive, inexplicable.<sup>31</sup> The narrator attempts to discursively separate Angélica from the multitude of other moving subjects, as if to physically seal her off from the contagious enthusiasm of the dance(rs) and to define what makes her unique. But what if she herself is the very source of this contagion?

### Narrative Passion

The narrator is a viewer but also a participant in this dance. He attempts to maintain some degree of hygienic distance from the contagion of the crowd, but he never succeeds in separating himself completely from the others. Nor does he choose to do so. While on the one hand he needs to show that he is a part of this elite group of Cubans, on the other he is also conflicted about his status as a *bourgeois gentilhomme*.<sup>32</sup> A disciple of Domingo Del Monte, Palma has an exaggerated opinion of himself as a man of letters. Del Monte taught that a novelist, like a gifted social scientist, is an *ingenio superior*, the *crème de la crème* of his society. As such, he is endowed with a greater capacity for critical reason and a more "accurate" sense of reality. For him, historical novels are the model to emulate. Says Del Monte of the historical novelist:

No es menos necesaria la ciencia minuciosa del anticuario... Y esta ciencia no se reduce a conocer la necrología, y los resultados visibles de los hechos, sino a solicitar codicioso, por cuantos medios estén a nuestro alcance, las noticias más prolijas acerca de las costumbres del siglo que se quiere representar. Las costumbres se conocen, o al menos se sospechan, por el estudio de las leyes, por el de las letras, las ciencias, las artes, las preocupaciones del tiempo: y aun no bastan tales investigaciones; que si el novelista pretende imprimir a su obra el sello peculiar, inequívocable de una época dada, es preciso que con la tenacísima curiosidad de una mujer, pero al mismo tiempo con la perspicacia sagaz de un sabio, revuelva guardarropas, visite museos de antigüallas, consulte cuadros, y pinturas, y examine y compare ruinas de toda especie ("Novela histórica" 119).

The members of Del Monte's *tertulia*, as purported masters of many fields, have learned to fashion themselves as intellectually "elevated" from the others because of their role as scribes.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Eduardo Ezponda's *La mulata: estudio fisiológico, social y jurídico*, or Luis Betancourt's "El baile."

<sup>31</sup> The description of Angélica is curiously similar to that of the mixed-race woman in Eduardo Ezponda's *La mulata*: "[Tiene] cierto modo de ser que no se confunde con ningún otro, es un tipo *sui generis*... Todavía no se ha pintado [] en el lienzo" (11).

<sup>32</sup> This phrase was originally meant to be oxymoronic: a gentleman of the nobility cannot also be "bourgeois" in the pre-revolutionary French sense (See Molière's 1670 five-act drama by the same name). But, like everything in Cuba in this era, paradox rules the day. Since the term "bourgeois" was not in common usage in the early nineteenth century, my deployment of the word—along with (proto)national, patriotic, and others—is in itself anachronistic. And even if Palma was not part of the Cuban *sacarocracia*, or self-defined sugar aristocracy, he was a member of the small intellectual elite who would today be called—in our expansive contemporary use of the term—bourgeois, if not gentlemanly.

Indeed, they are often physically distanced from their objects of study. (Villaverde, in a famous example, pictures his narrator looking out, as if from a balcony, over the crowd of dancers in the *Cecilia Valdés* of 1882.) Yet, as Palma expresses in his famous 1838 critical essay on the novel, physical closeness to, and contact with, the material one studies is the key to narrative authenticity. This is most clearly the case when one is charting recent events. And authenticity is as important as intellect for a chronicler of local history. But it means, crucially, that the novelist-as-narrator is not immune from the contamination that comes with such contact with the present or recent past. Says Palma:

He aquí la causa porque muchos positivistas insustanciales ven, a pesar de sus declamaciones, flotar sobre la haz de todas la inteligencias superiores a los poetas y novelistas, como la flor y nata del ingenio humano. Un autor en el día es tan positivo como el más sólido matemático, y desgraciado de él si al tomar la pluma pierde de vista la sociedad en que se halla, y sólo llena el papel de falsedades o insulseces; pues obtendrá en retorno a sus tareas en vida la mofa de los críticos, y el olvido de la posteridad en muerte (“La novela” 15-16).

Thus, not only should the novel accurately represent daily life. The novelist should not forget that, despite his purported intellectual sophistication, he himself is not “above” his peers, but rather, situated in close physical (if not moral) proximity to those he writes about. The greater the contact the novelist is able to maintain with his objects of study, the more true to life his representations will be.

As if to prove his worth as a narrative historian of recent events, the narrator of *El cólera*... situates himself in close proximity to the action of his story. After establishing that it is understood that only “decent people” (ie: white bourgeois Creoles or Spaniards) attend this party, he remarks in hazy retrospect that “ahora me parece que no ha habido un carnaval en La Habana (del los que yo he visto, se entiende) tan loco y divertido como el de 1833” (47) (my emphasis). Despite carnival’s closeness to the terrifying cholera event (the two irrupted more or less simultaneously on September 19<sup>th</sup> of that year), the narrator positions himself as a full participant in the *locura* and *diversión* of a delightfully mischievous communal (bourgeois) activity. In the attempt to remain authentic, he abandons the search for the rational scientific distance of what Imeldo Álvarez García, citing the generation of the 1830s, calls “el ojo ordenador, dibujante, que traza límites y se adueña del espacio” (25). Thus instead of remaining segregated from the crowd, the narrator plunges headlong into the romantic pleasures of the “intrigue,” the dance, and its accompanying somatic excess (*El cólera* 47). In doing so, he sacrifices a certain measure of narrative realism. “Sería inútil pretensión describir los trajes, chistes, impertinencias y aun intrigas de las máscaras,” he scoffs impatiently. “Dejemos tal trabajo a algún curioso observador de nuestras costumbres, y entremos de rondón a tratar de lo que más atañe al asunto de esta historia” (47).<sup>33</sup> He is more interested in romantic plot than rational portraiture. The more involved he becomes, the less scientifically neutral he gets. Thus the narrator himself cannot count himself as immune from contact with the sexualized objects he studies.

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<sup>33</sup> The narrator is an example of what Homi Bhabha calls the narrative splitting of the subject of identification, in which the ethnographic observer looks at himself as part of the field of observation; “For ethnography demands that the subject has to split itself into object and subject in the process of identifying the field of knowledge” (215). He is the pedagogical object as well as the performative subject of the narrative. Even as he portrays his city’s past as a narrative chronicler, the narrator readily includes his hedonist self among the revelers at this festival. Thus, importantly for my argument, he is not exempt from the contagious enthusiasm of the fun-loving dancers.

If the narrative is meant to encourage racially homogenous hetero-normative courtship mandates as part of a reproductive imperative, then the narrator imparts it well. Like his companions, he demonstrates a virtual inability to escape the compelling attractiveness of the charming Angélica. It is as if he had no will of his own to resist her magnetic enchantments.<sup>34</sup> The narrator thus participates in his own normalizing project of social control. He ridicules as less than truly masculine any man who would not stop and “contemplate” Angélica. More subtly, he implies that such a man is a counterfeit Cuban, unfit for national belonging. Among the fawning gawkers “deteniéndose a examinar cada belleza, descollaba una entre éstas,” he says, “a quien era forzoso que a contemplar se detuviera todo hombre que tuviese ojos en la cara y corazón en el pecho” (47). In other words, a man would be crazy (or something less than Cuban) not to admire her.

The romantic viewer of Angélica’s body, however, is perhaps more enchanted by his own descriptions than by the plot itself. This happens in Eduardo Ezponda’s later depiction of the mulata as well. Both fiction and nonfiction get carried away by their own lascivious descriptions. Palma loses himself in his own contemplations of the female figure as if seduced by his own creative or romantic musings:

Aún me parece que la estoy mirando... ¡Pero qué rostro de aquella muchacha! Muchas veces he soñado con una belleza ideal, y habría dado cualquier cosa porque se hubiesen revestido de humana forma mis fantasías, mas nunca llegaron mis ilusiones hasta el punto de figurarme una joven como aquella (48).

He projects these discursive fantasies onto the slippery screen of this idealized figure, as if she were an emblem—an aesthetic object—of near-perfect purity and innocence with no history of her own. While Angélica’s body is the silenced object of pleasure, the narrator, figured as the universal male subject, is constructed as pleasure’s only legitimate agent. As such, he must control the female body’s movements. As Mary Poovey writes in the context of gynaecological inquiry, the representation (whether scientific or fictional) of woman is itself a form of silencing. Paradoxically, however, this silencing creates a wide discursive window; it “opens a space in which meanings can proliferate” (“Scenes” 152). Poovey elaborates:

But the very silence that authorizes these different [in her case] medical practices also produces at the site of the reproductive female body an undecidability that is dangerous, and the contradictions that emerge within this excess undermine the authority that medical men both claim and need (152).

The silencing of the female body—whether physical or discursive—actually produces an excess of meanings. In order to curtail the proliferation of multiple meanings and reassert discursive authority over his so-called objects of study, the narrator must rhetorically control female sexuality. This involves a minute and rational cataloguing of that body. However, the narrator is not fully in control of his own imagination. He becomes the victim of his own projected desires, “ensnared in the fantasy of woman’s sexuality” (Poovey, “Scenes” 155).

The lurid backdrop of the masquerade allows the narrator to elaborately display Angélica as a delightful counterpoint to her suspicious and morally dubious surroundings; as opposed to the dark lubricity of the dance, she is a beacon of grace and light. Paired with her suitor Jacinto,

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<sup>34</sup> See Ezponda: “Es así como se explique que inflame los deseos y arrastre la voluntad de los hombres...” (11).

she serenely glides along as his moving showpiece with—in language later echoed by Villaverde—“toda la gentileza y donaire de su cuerpo, ... la morbidez, el compás y la ligereza de sus movimientos” (*El cólera* 51).<sup>35</sup> The narrator wants it both ways: he asserts that Angélica is more aerial (or angelic) than carnal, more the ethereal vision of an upper-class fairy queen than the fleshy reality of a voluptuous flirt. At the same time, he emphasizes her Cuban<sup>36</sup> specificity: she is at once sumptuous object and sexy subject, both safe and dangerous territory. In other words, she is both chaste and spurious, virtuous and inherently *Cuban*. She must show some chutzpah if she is to survive the cholera epidemic and help reproduce *Cubanidad*. Yet he would rather prolong her mysteriousness as much as possible, so as to increase narrative suspense. Peter Brooks writes that “...direct access to the object of desire never can be unproblematic or linear” (*Body Work* 19). Narrative desire simultaneously seeks and puts off the erotic *dénouement* that signifies both its fulfillment and its end: “the death of desiring, the silence of the text” (20). The reason why the narrator spends so much time depicting the body is that the search—for certainty, for resolution—is more pleasurable than the conquest itself.

The narrator cannot help but delve into a bit of juicy detail regarding the visual pleasures of Cuban female corporeality accorded to male observers like himself: “Permítaseme, de paso, una observación,” he confides to his reader,

y es que las hijas de este suelo tienen cierta blandura en sus miembros y actitudes, debidas tal vez a la voluptuosidad del clima, que las distingue mucho de las mujeres de otras tierras, y se deslizan en la danza con la misma suavidad y elegante destreza que la garza sobre las aguas... (*El cólera* 51).

The straightforward intentions of early realism struggle against the seductive sensuality of romanticism. In addition, the narrator is conflicted about woman’s most enticing qualities. On the one hand, the novel praises a passive, proper, shore-bird-like womanhood grounded, immobile, in the Cuban soil (“las hijas de este suelo tienen cierta blandura...”). On the other, it relishes the textual pleasures afforded the observer as he traces this woman’s more active characteristics. Cuban women, it seems, are defined by their dancerly *deslizar*, a destabilizing movement like the dance that, while alluring, might also at any minute threaten the rigid categories of gender, race, or class that separate one social group from another. Perhaps this is what renders the dance(r) so seductive.<sup>37</sup> Palma very nearly lets his narrator get carried away by desire for its palpitating movements. He does more than simply insinuate that all “personas decentes” should be part of the romantic process of finding a sexual partner and thus procreating *Cubanidad* (47). He also inadvertently shows that desire, once ignited, is not as easily trained and manipulated as one might expect.

### **Native Delights**

The icon of proper Cuban womanhood operates as a metaphor for Cuban society, if not the idea of Nation itself. In this signifying process, in order for the metaphor—and not the woman—to speak, individual female subjectivity is often erased. Indeed, as Eva Feder Kittay

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<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to ignore the parallels here. The only difference is that Palma does not directly state that Angélica is of mixed blood. Villaverde: Cecilia is “todo movilidad y fuego” (73). Ezponda: “De cualquier modo que hable o se mueva [la mulata] derrama en torno suyo un raudal de liviandades, tan hechiceras como inefables, y que brotan de su índole con absoluta espontaneidad, inoculándonos el delirio y fascinándonos como las sirenas de la fábula” (12-13).

<sup>36</sup> ...and by extension, racialized...

<sup>37</sup> See Ezponda pp. 14-15 on the dance.

shows, women have long been used as metaphors for men's projects. According to Kittay, "Man identifies that which he wants and desires, or has acquired or fears acquiring, as Woman" (64).<sup>38</sup> The national imaginary is one concept all too often metaphorized by Woman. Adriana Méndez Rodenas, in *Gender and Nationalism in Colonial Cuba*, writes that

The [Latin American] nineteenth-century literary imagination established a poetic correspondence between nation and womanhood, so that the emerging sense of national cohesion was figured largely through a female protagonist, who came to embody the core values of the nation (4).<sup>39</sup>

Obviously, the term "national cohesion" cannot apply to 1830s Cuba in the same way as it can to Argentina or Mexico, which at that time had already gained political independence from Spain. Méndez implies, however, that the appropriation of the female figure as symbol or object is equivalent in both cases: "The traditional association between woman and land, with man as patriarch, has resulted in women's roles being largely metaphorical" (4). Thus, paradoxically, while a novel such as *El cólera en la Habana* explores individual subjects within the context of a specific community, it also nearly smothers the one most often at the heart of its project, the woman.

In *El cólera en la Habana*, Palma's erasure of Angélica's subjectivity, which runs parallel to his characterization of her as a metaphor for Cuba, is revealed primarily through references to the tropics. Just as land is often feminized, Caribbean females are often conflated with flowers. "Since the earliest travel writing, flowers have been metaphorized in Caribbean literature to imagine a racialized and subordinate female sexuality," writes Natasha Tinsley in her 2003 dissertation study—since published in book form—of Caribbean women (24). Indeed, descriptions of Angélica abound with metaphors of tropical flora and fauna. In Palma's opinion, no other female body can compete in perfection with his model of Cuban femininity. He implies that the idealized Cuban woman and the Caribbean climate share a similar nature: languidness, availability, voluptuousness, fecundity. While he is no doubt contesting the widely held Peninsular view that Creole bodies were inferior in all senses to European ones, he is also participating in what Anne McClintock calls "both a *poetics* of ambivalence and a *politics* of violence" (28). While he may be appreciating her aesthetic beauty, he is also using the representation of the female body for his own political purposes.<sup>40</sup>

What Homi Bhabha calls the "imaginative geographies" of the "nation-space" begin in this novel with the simplest of similes (*Location* 243, 209). Angélica is described as a bud about to blossom, a flower awaiting the visit of a courteous pollinator, "así como los zunzunes en torno de los azahares del naranjo" (*El cólera* 84). The metaphor is more complex than it first appears. Instead of the usual portrayal of local flora-woman being seduced by European colonizer, here it is the opposite. The bee hummingbird, endemic only to the island of Cuba, represents Angélica's putatively Habanese suitor. In contrast, the sweet citrus blossom, brought across the Atlantic by the earliest European settlers, symbolizes Angélica the *forastera*. The former, a member of the

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<sup>38</sup> "In these metaphors, man mediates his engagement with the world through a representation of it as Woman and metaphorically transposes his relation to Woman on to his relation with the World" (63). See Feder Kittay.

<sup>39</sup> Méndez continues: "...the figuring of nation [] dominated the Romantic literary imagination, [and] historical agency has been relegated almost exclusively to the phallic realm, resulting in the 'grand narrative' of Latin American historiography (4).

<sup>40</sup> This is not to discount the author's or his people's own memory of violence and pain. As Bhabha thoughtfully remarks: "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor" (200).

native local fauna, is able to “colonize” the exotic foreign flora and bring it under biological control.

In this novel, it goes without saying that nature and, by metaphorical association, woman, needs proper (male Creole) stewardship in order to prosper and reproduce healthy (hybrid) offspring. Although the pollination of *azahar* by *zunzún* is represented as occurring “naturally,” it cannot have been more contrived: Oranges and lemons, among other imported fruits and flowers, were cultivated in botanic gardens as part of a larger colonial process of subduing and channeling nature’s abundance.<sup>41</sup> Natasha Tinsley, echoing Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses*, calls planned tropical gardens a “decorative carving up of the confused monotony of [Caribbean] space” (26). In Cuba, it is also a form of discursive violence that serves not only to mask the physical violence of slavery, as Tinsley affirms, but also the epistemic violence of nation or community building. While imported flowers in the Caribbean are naturalized to such a degree that they no longer stand out as foreign imports, they still have a history Other (or foreign) to Cuba. Thus, curiously, *Angélica-azahar* is both a metaphor of Cuba *and* its Other; yet again, she is a contradiction in terms. In any case, Palma’s own participation in these forms of silencing is masked by his ornate romantic style:

Nuestra joven cubana no conocía, sin embargo, la reputación del caballero, y en el interés que él logró inspirarle, no tuvo parte otra cosa que aquella oculta inclinación que llaman simpatía, la cual parece que nos va arrastrando por entre los entes de la creación sin fijarnos en ninguno, hasta que nos conduce al lado de aquel ser que ha de duplicar nuestra existencia; así el polen de las plantas atraviesa en alas del viento los bosques y los prados, y no va a caer sino sobre la corola de la flor a que la naturaleza lo destina (58).

The trope of woman as flora may also represent an attempt to impose some semblance of order on the chaotic multiracial landscape of Cuba. Just like science’s obsession with taxonomies, eighteenth century naturalists adored the classification of plants and animals. Tinsley notes that botanical gardens were invented not in Europe but in the Caribbean (*El cólera* 26). Because *Angélica* is a hyperbolic stereotype of Cuban femininity, representations of her “must be anxiously repeated,” fetishized, described again and again, in order to convince the reader that they are natural (95). Like fruit, she is represented as a biological organism “naturally” destined for local breeding and consumption.

Yet metaphors like these overflow with multiple connotations. As a paradoxical figure (embodying margin/center, subject/object, native/Other), *Angélica* (as Tinsley says of hybrid women) “aestheticize[s] the line between civilization and savagery,” and more (in)visibly, between black and white (Tinsley 71). For instance, her tropical-but-foreign allure is heightened by a light racialization, a uniquely Caribbean tinge. This is both a troubling and titillating detail for the narrator. The first sentence describing *Angélica* begins with a negation. While it might be impossible to find terms to describe her accurately, she can more easily be defined by what she is not. Needless to say, this does not detract one iota from the sensuous experience of attempting to paint her portrait. The elaborate process of describing her—the “no”s, the “como”s—is more pleasurable than the resulting description itself:

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<sup>41</sup> “The botanical history of the Caribbean,” according to Natasha Tinsley, “provides a new dimension to Italian feminist Rosi Braidotti’s argument that ‘nature is a cultural construction’ ” (24). Among the flowers imported by colonists, Tinsley charts “bougainvillea, hibiscus, flamboyant, bird of paradise, poinsetta, plumeria, frangipani, oleander, and jasmine” –in short, everything that we now associate with the Caribbean (24-5).

No era blanca como las tibias hijas del Norte, porque el sol de los trópicos había derramado algunas leves tintes en aquel cutis tan terso y delicado, como el centro de un caracol. ¡Qué bien caían sobre aquella garganta, tan linda y torneada, los rizos de su cabello más negro que el azabache! Sus ojos, oscuros como el velo de la noche, derramaban, dondequiera que se dirigían, luces de vida e ilusiones de ventura; y en su frente pura y serena tal me parecía que estaba viendo pasar los angelidades pensamientos de su alma, así como pasan las candidas nubecillas por el azul immaculado de los cielos (48).

It is important to note that Angélica is contrasted with las “tibias hijas del Norte.” While *tibia* can certainly describe the light skin color of those from northern climes, it is also known as a universal sexual reference. Nineteenth century woman, we recall, was largely defined by the split image of her sexuality. According to Gilbert and Gubar, for example, she was either a virgin or a whore, an angel or a demon depending on her activities.<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein depicts her as a mermaid or a monster, suggesting that gender roles are at the heart of human malaise (*Mermaid*). As far back as 1931, Virginia Woolf theorized that the angel of the house must be vanquished by the active—and thus the demonized—writing woman (“Professions”). The symbolic violence of the age-old representation applies to the Caribbean woman as well as her “tepid” Northern counterpart. Indeed, as she is represented to the reader, Angélica spends much of her time lounging or curling up cozily in the *taburetillo* (a drawing room chair for ladies), drinking tea, and reading Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi*. If she does go out it is in a carriage under the protection of her mother and the *calesero*. Yet while women in every culture may be dichotomized as perfect or fallen, the nature of the demon changes in the Caribbean. While the good Creole girl will stay contained in sanctioned rooms or carriages, she cannot be completely protected from somatic mixing. As we witnessed in the dance, even in highly circumscribed settings, this bodily enmeshment and confusion does occur. And while that cultural practice of confining women inside is not likely to differ much from the slightly less constricting Anglo-French customs, another factor complicates the scene here. In the Caribbean, unlike in Europe, the degree of racial interpersonal contact is intense. While the European woman is typified as white almost by default, the cubana—however light-skinned she may appear—is always already contaminated by the Caribbean atmosphere. The angel in the house—at least at this point in Cuban prose narrative—does not even need a deviant double is the devil in the street. The quintessential Cuban girl is always already her denigrated, racialized Other.

Angélica certainly does not conform to the “tibia” stereotype classifying the women of the North. She is far spicier than that. She imitates and—but more importantly—improves upon the femininity of her northern sisters by adding a delightful, exoticized tinge of native color to the Europeanized feminine ideal. On the one hand, she embodies the snow-white virginal qualities of the angel of the house (she reads, she lounges, drinks tea, waits for her suitor to arrive). On the other, it is her Caribbean *tinte* which makes her so alluring and seductive (*El cólera* 48). Her “belleza ideal” comes from being white-but-not-quite, from being “the best of both worlds,” from being Euro-Cuban. The narrator hints at, but never directly tackles, the thorny question of race.

Imeldo Álvarez García’s description of the woman in early Cuban fiction as “la mujer-lirio, mujer-cielo, mujer-ángel y, a veces, la mujer-problema” identifies the virgin or angel archetype in a racialized context. While waxing poetic about the idealized virginal female figure,

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<sup>42</sup> See *The Madwoman in the Attic* or Nina Auerbach’s *The Woman and the Demon*.

Álvarez also describes her inverse, “[e]l tipo de mujer-pecado, la hembra-telúrica, la hembra de rompe y rasga, de misterioso atractivo sexual...” (29). This *hembra* is firmly connected to the earth and to the biological impulses of life. While the wicked witch reigns over the Black Forest or terrorizes the brothers Grimm, she lacks the intense sexualization of her tropical counterpart. Woman’s racialization inevitably comes from Africa or the Caribbean. It is *la zona tórrida* which produces bold, powerful, magnetically attractive but potentially dangerous women. “La hembra de rompe y rasga” is governed solely by instinct, desire, and madness. Her destructive force can wreak havoc upon the civilized world. Charlotte Brontë’s iconic alter ego, Bertha Mason, is Jamaican Creole. Caribbean woman, according to Álvarez’s portrait, possesses a tropical wildness that cannot be reined in by Europeanized social mores.

The discursive splitting of woman into two mirror-images—positive and negative—was part of an effort to come to terms with flesh-and-blood women’s real mystery and power, the power to create life. Woman’s threatening force was somewhat subdued by her literary portrayal as feeble and constrained. Indeed, woman was constructed in early Cuban texts as the passive object of erotic desire. Yet haunting this slight and submissive figure one can discern the more powerful, more dangerous *Other half*, the black woman behind the scenes. In a European context, Sander Gilman describes her function as “sexualiz[ing] the society in which [] she is found...mark[ing] the presence of illicit sexual activity” (228). While she lurks in many European texts, the woman of color is fully visible in Caribbean ones. Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré’s short story “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” paints a powerful double portrait of the meeting of the Europeanized, white angel woman and the Africanized prostitute.<sup>43</sup> In the Caribbean, these two women are one. When the goods get together, as Irigaray says, their artificially distinct identities merge. All of these competing attributes will be embodied in the mulata, the archetypal Cuban woman, “el encuentro de dos fuerzas o elementos, contradicción viva,” as Álvarez García puts it (29-30).

In *El cólera en la Habana*, this classic doubling of the female self is not yet fully contained within one individual female body. Angélica is still (mostly) the idealized projection of the white male imaginary. While she is certainly a paradoxical figure, she is not over(t)ly racialized as a mulata. Nor, although she arrives with the cholera epidemic, is she characterized as a carrier of contagion.<sup>44</sup> In Palma’s account, the angelic female’s deviant “double”—characterized here, I suggest, but the cholera epidemic—is still separated from the “mujer-cielo” by narrative scission. Woman (Angélica) and disease (cholera) are not yet one and the same. The negative Other half is personified as the epidemic, while Angélica, the “mujer-cielo, mujer-ángel” remains (relatively) pure, seemingly immune. For instance, even when she is surrounded by dead bodies, she appears untarnished by disease: “...pues su cuello de cisne y su blanquísima espalda resplandecían a la luz de la mañana con todo el brillo de la hermosura y de la vida” (92).

Angélica, the prototypical Cuban woman of early Cuban text, is a transitional figure in Cuban narrative. I say she is “relatively” pure and “mostly” idealized because, in reality, her figure marks a mid-point in the nineteenth century evolution of *la cubana* from the whitened Europeanized angel to the racialized Africanized demon. She is not a late century Cecilia Valdés, but neither is she an early 1800s Spanish sugar baron’s *señorita*. Rather, Angélica, while grounded in Cuban soil, is *a caballo* between the two worlds. She represents both the white calla lily of chastity as depicted in European paintings and the suspicious siren of the Bermuda Triangle. Intriguingly, her arrival in Havana coincides with carnival as well as cholera, and thus

<sup>43</sup> See Ferré’s *Papeles de Pandora*.

<sup>44</sup> In contrast, more overtly racialized women like Cecilia Valdés will be more openly associated with disease. See Ch. 4.

she cannot but come into contact with the onset of excess hedonism, revelry, and bodily confusion. Already, this is a clue to her ambiguous status. She appears at the carnival dance, the ultimate trope of somatic impurity. This is a clear second sign of trouble. Far from “*tibia*” or asexual, she is magnetically, exotically attractive. In short, the girl is dangerous simply by virtue of the fact that she is a *Cuban woman*. She is neither African nor Spanish, but both, and she has the power to reproduce little Cubans who will require more surveillance and policing by the bourgeois and the Spanish state apparatuses. Later, Cuban Woman will become much more threatening to male authors than she is now, but for the moment she still embodies the best of both worlds: she is a hearty and vivacious—yet sexy and sensuous—potential procreator of *Cubanidad*.

*El cólera en la Habana* is also an example of a novel in which woman and the natural world, captured in the male imagination, together form a robust national imaginary. Palma’s work is not the first to use the figure of woman in this way. The novelist Cirilio Villaverde had practiced the romanticized characterization of “*mujer-tierra*” and “*heroína-Cuba*” as early as 1837, when at age 25 he published *La cueva de Taganana* (Azougarh 26). As Álvarez García, following Roberto Friol, writes, early Cuban literature, written mostly by urban(e) Euro-Creole men, “trate de tomar posesión de la patria mediante la posesión de la mujer y del espacio en que viven: la naturaleza cubana” (28) (my emphasis). It is not too much to claim that iconic woman *is* Cuba, though both are fanciful constructs. The foundational (“*mujer-tierra*” + *hombre-ciudad*) aspect of *El cólera en la Habana* is apparent before the actual narration begins. Without losing her delicate feminine allure, the ideal Cuban woman is uniquely equipped not only to survive in the harsh, diseased climate of the torrid tropics. She also exudes a softness and plant-like “flexibility;” ie: she is sexually available to the Cuban man. Yet somehow she manages to survive in the polluted atmosphere of the city. The carnival dance is ultimately an acknowledgement of her participation in Cuban communal life.

### Knowing “Woman”

In his compulsive fascination with the female body and its movements, this narrator shows a remarkable similarity to that of our previous story. He is erotically invested in seeing, and therefore knowing, the female object of his investigations.<sup>46</sup> Here, however, there is no occult zone of deviant emotions to be unveiled and scrutinized as in *Carmen y Adela*. The *doncella* in this story does not attempt to hide any secret aspect of her character or behavior from prying eyes. Like her unmasked face, she lives her life passively and transparently. There is no anatomical sign of female criminality, no particular mark pointing to racialized or sexual deviance. As an authentic Cuban, she is naturally tinted (tinged, dyed,<sup>47</sup> racialized?) by the tropical sun. Angélica naturally evokes suspicion simply because she is a woman. As Jacqueline Urla and Jennifer Terry write in their introduction to *Deviant Bodies*, “female bodies are perceived to be inherently deviant in relation to a male norm of the human body... The idea that deviance could be masquerading under the guise of ‘normal’ woman served to construct all women as potentially dangerous” (13). As a material entity chained to her body, Woman is by nature (or by Western metaphysical thought) irrational and hypersexual. The only way to dampen down this dangerous embodiment—and the unmanageable narrative desire for it—is to

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<sup>46</sup> As Peter Brooks reminds us, the body... is always the subject of curiosity, of an ever-renewed project of knowing” (Body Work, 1).

<sup>47</sup> Palma uses the word “tinte” (48). According to the OED, tint, tinge, tinct, and taint have intermingling etymologies, thus mixing the visual/physical with the moral.

take her body out of circulation, tie her up in marriage, seal off her sexuality, and place her under the care of a virtuous male steward.

According to Nancy Armstrong, nineteenth century novels are obsessed with redefining both women and desire. “[T]he rise of the novel,” she says, “hinged upon a struggle to say what made a woman desirable” (4-5). Armstrong argues that domestic novels begin to represent all types of social exchange primarily through the normative (hetero)sexual contract. Thus new forms of gender and sexuality are to be found at the heart of modern fiction. For Armstrong, the nineteenth century novel cannot be understood apart from the gendered and sexualized understanding of individual identity that it produced. The political, social, or economic interests of the novel were disguised by a preoccupation with modern sexuality. For example, while the novel helped define private life as the heart of the middle class feminine universe, it also acknowledged that most women did not fit tidily into this fictional construction. Thus woman ended up being depicted as both the problem *and the solution* to the modern conundrum of industrialized societies. She was both the bearer of virtues (chastity, honor) and the carrier of vices (sexuality, intrigue), the sexualized object of desire as well as desire’s agential subject. Woman was constructed as naturally duplicitous and “two-faced,” not to be trusted with rational decisions or public life. For good reason she becomes synecdoche for all of what Anne McClintock calls the “presiding contradictions within industrial modernity” (43).<sup>48</sup>

One task of the novel, writes Armstrong, is to decipher, decode, and contain an elusive femininity. The woman in this story, of course, is more than just an object; she speaks, acts, and exerts her own will. In fact, through the course of the novel she becomes more and more an active participant in her surroundings. This burgeoning subjectivity, it is worth noting, serves to make her even more desirable to her male observer. After all, even Pygmalion preferred a living being to a lifeless statue.<sup>49</sup> The former could mirror and respond to his desires, while the latter was cold and sterile. Similarly, the text breathes animated life into Angélica. If she remains serene, ethereal, and pure, she also remains inaccessible to flesh-and-blood man, the anticipated reader of the tale. Yet Cuban man must attain her, and take sanctioned control of her body, in order for *Cubanidad* to self-propagate and thrive. Romantic desire, well-channeled, is what creates more Cuban subjects. Through his writing, Palma grants himself, his narrator, and his reader access to Angélica—or at least to the representation of Angélica—in and through the text. At its heart, then, this community-building story revolves around the desire to control women’s bodies and the reproductive capacity that they comprise—through text, if not in “real” life. It achieves its goal through the narrative control of the imaginary (fictional) yet archetypal Cuban Woman. At the level of the plot, the containment of desire is achieved through the socially stabilizing act of church marriage.

In order to satisfy the (narrator’s/writer’s/reader’s) desire to contain the female subject within the narrative, Angélica’s body must eventually be consigned to the only obviously suitable male partner, Jacinto. However, if this occurs immediately, the possession of the woman will not be nearly as satisfying. Narrative suspense will be shortchanged, and narrative pleasure curtailed. Thus the action of the plot must be adequately prolonged; the climax postponed. For Doris Sommer, there must be some obstacle to the end goal of married love (*Foundational Fictions* 46-8). Angélica must navigate the perilous waters of a contaminated city full of masks and false appearances before she can find her way into the golden corral of blissful matrimony.

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<sup>48</sup> For more on the woman as metaphor for the modern nation, see Méndez Rodena’s *Gender and Nationalism in Colonial Cuba*, as well as *Between Woman and Nation*, ed.s, Alarcón, Kaplan, Moallem, or *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, Minoo Moallem.

<sup>49</sup> In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion fell in love with the female statue he had carved; when he touched her, Aphrodite granted his wish that she become human.

Or perhaps it is the writer/narrator who must lead her chivalrously to safety. If Jacinto participates at all, it is as a shy secondary actor. In fact, although the narrator never says it directly, it is clear that he views Jacinto as a timid soul hesitant to return to the *intramuros* after the epidemic has run its course (*El cólera* 96-7). The narrator focuses his critiques on the behavior of the Habanese populace in general; for example: “muchos pusieron pies en polvorosa en cuanto se sintieron husmeados por el toro, y para estos tales mi historia tendrá tanta novedad como la más peregrina leyenda” (67). Rather than emphasizing Jacinto’s weakness in particular, he implicates a broader bourgeois culture of hypocrisy and fickleness.

The chaos of the cholera epidemic is similar to that of a carnival masquerade in that certain roles are temporarily reversed. Men become fearful, women strong; inadvertently revealing the instability of gender categories. The narrator praises Cuban Woman for the noble qualities with which she arms herself when under duress: “La tímida y débil mujer se revistió de la fuerza y ánimo varoniles, y el hombre tuvo que abandonar sus atributos de protector, para entregarse ignominiosamente a los cuidados del sexo protegido” (*El cólera* 63). This efficacious role reversal would not have happened, he implies, in northern climes. Cuban women—in contrast, perhaps, to their Peninsular counterparts—are unique in their commendable “valor pasivo” (63). Not only does the narrator couch his essentializing observations in “el conocimiento que todos tenemos del bello sexo,” but he also uses the occasion to remind his fellow men of their undue reliance on Cuban female “constancia heroica” (63). While woman, he says, is by nature fundamentally “sensible y generosa,” only *la cubana* demonstrates the necessary fortitude and faith “cuando tiene que someterse a la resignación y el sufrimiento” (63). Unfortunately, this is due to both the relative weakness of bourgeois Cuban men and to their compensatory “tiranía sobre el sexo débil” (64). Yet even as he chastises his fellow *compatriotas*, the narrator’s stark depiction serves to highlight Cuban female exemplarity. In other words, no woman is superior to the Cuban woman, and all men, as self-absorbed as they might be, should appreciate her sacrifices for the common (ie: Cuban, not Spanish) good. Thus not only does he reaffirm man as the universal human subject (“el conocimiento que *todos tenemos* del bello sexo”), but he also takes advantage of an opportunity to further promote (as fictional as it may be) a Cuban cultural identity.

The point of this digression, the narrator assures us, is not to frustrate his readers’ desire for narrative pleasure, but rather to serve as a behavioral example for the generations to come; “tengo mis barruntos” he says, “de que este libro sirva de algún provecho a la posteridad” (read: our *Cuban* progeny) (67). Someone, he hopes, will read this novel as a constructive criticism of the Habanese bourgeoisie. In this passage he reveals not only an exalted sense of himself (as novel writer) as the most powerful type of narrative historian, but he also shows a resolute sense of hope about the future of his community. Without delving into the multiple exclusions produced by such a nation-making gesture, we can pause to note the optimism apparent in this phrase.

### Duplicitous Fictions

*El cólera en la Habana* contains some important elements of a foundational fiction à la Doris Sommer. It sets the stage (or prepares the bed) for the creation of the modern Cuban subject. Angélica and her Habanese suitor, Jacinto, survive the epidemic and begin their life anew after the menace has passed. One might even say that Jacinto colonizes and domesticates the dangerous Other half of woman. Two disparate aspects of the island—the modern city, embodied by Jacinto, and the traditional country, symbolized by Angélica—are united in church-

and state-sanctioned marriage. In spite of the bride's suspicious "forastera" background, it is through legitimate hetero-normative desire that new Cubans subjects will be engendered. The obscure history of one side of the marriage union is wiped clean by the pair's exemplary behavior. As Sommer remarks in Part II of her 1991 book, Latin American social stability is reinforced (if not wholeheartedly invented) by the novelistic legislation of productive desire. As she sums it up tidily, "the erotic goal [at the end of a novel]...is a microcosmic expression of nationhood;" the fictional model is "an exhortation to be fruitful and multiply" (6, 49). *Cubanidad*, if not nationhood, is fancifully evoked through the allegory of a common, if romanticized, goal.

The fictional texts written during the so-called Cuban colonial literary boom of 1837-46 demonstrate a preoccupation with this erotic passion.<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, they attempt to educate desire by providing reproducible examples like the happy union of Jacinto and Angélica. Such productive romance helps to create what Margaret Cohen calls an "sentimental community" of likeminded individuals who must strive to replicate in real life what they have read in fiction (116). For Cohen, the modern novel creates this imaginary social cohesion. For Álvarez García and others,<sup>51</sup> the desire in these novels is a subliminal communication of desperate, clandestine Cuban patriotism. The woman as the object of desire becomes a metaphor for imagining *la patria*. Thus, "los intelectuales *criollos* proceden a la temática pasional, al dominio y control de la vida emocional, individual. Y la mujer deviene el compendio-idealista de una eticidad vedada en la dimensión real" (Álvarez García 29).

On the other hand, many of these novels reveal that desire can just as easily escape social control. Stories of love gone awry abound in the literary boom of the 1830s and '40s. Villaverde's *La peña blanca* and *El ave muerta* (both 1837) explore themes of incest. Novels such as Felix Tanco's *Petrona y Rosalía* (1838) and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco* (1839) criticize the vicious cycle of white men's uncontrolled lust for subaltern (read: slave) women. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* examines the opposite. Written in 1841, *Sab* provides an example of the excessive desire of a mulato slave for his white female owner. This is a desire that takes on a life of its own, contaminating Sab's pure soul. At the end of the novel, the proto-Cuban protagonist's desperate epistle to his white love-object unleashes a passion that literally consumes his body, terminating both his life and the novel at once. Misplaced, misdirected, or masochistic desire like this is often the consequence—intended or not—of early Cuban prose fiction.

Stories of lust, passion, and desire reflect a wave of social (if not always proto-national) meliorism apparent in the first half of the nineteenth century. Whether they are critical or congratulatory of the sexual practices they represent, these narratives embody the tentative view that society will eventually, inevitably self-correct. Despite the romantic or repulsive melodramatic tone of some of these tales, most of their authors ardently believed in the potential of their work to transform social mores. In fact, the members of Domingo Del Monte's literary tertulia felt that it was their calling to guide Cuba—as if it were an impressionable child—toward moral improvement.<sup>52</sup> José Zacarías González del Valle writes, for example, "Había que mejorar las costumbres, despertar los sentimientos..." (*La vida literaria* 66-7). He urges the author of *Petrona y Rosalía*, Felix Tanco, to continue to relate to the Cuban bourgeoisie the grotesque

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<sup>50</sup> It was not just the male members of Domingo Del Monte's *tertulia* (1837-46) who wrote about desire: see Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* or Virginia Auber Noya's *Ambarina*.

<sup>51</sup> See Ivan Schulman's introduction to the 1981 edition of *Cecilia Valdés*, William Luis' book *Literary Bondage*, or Lorna Williams' *The Representation of Slavery in Cuban Fiction*.

<sup>52</sup> See Luis' Ch. 1, as well as Del Valle's *La vida literaria en Cuba (1836-1840)*.

details of domestic slavery: “Yo creo que su obra debe correr lo posible, porque viéndonos retratados, comenzaremos por odiar el retrato y acabaremos por mejorarnos a nosotros mismos” (*La vida literaria* 59). If seeing was believing, then the repugnant self-portrait should operate as a catalyst of responsible change.

After the salutary shock of the cholera epidemic, novels like *El cólera en la Habana* showed the bourgeois populace how to channel their desires toward socially acceptable and politically expedient ends. Lawful, legitimate family creation was the safest, least controversial terrain for a novelist to explore. Doris Sommer reminds us, for instance, of the fact that “Cubans had been loving Cubans productively for a long time” before the 1830s literary explosion aggressively attempted to harness it (*Foundational* 136). The challenge for the novel came in, one, learning how to legislate that desire so that it was constructive in a class- and race-specific manner, and two, avoiding a clash with the repressive Spanish government that by the late 1830s censored all works of literature.<sup>53</sup>

The novels written in the 1830s and '40s encouraged Cubans to reform their social and sexual behavior and become more dutiful, normalized citizens. Yet they are not overtly nationalistic. They modeled a bourgeois lifestyle that they pretended merely to represent (*Foundational* 31). They subtly and effectively “policed” a public that was weary of government control. It was more palatable to read about normative romance from a local Creole writer than to have specific family and pro-natal policies dictated by the Spanish state. Yet apart from their political goals, the two agendas were not so different. After all, Cuban conjugal love had broad appeal. It simply needed to be harnessed to a discreet agenda of social improvement. Nancy Armstrong suggests that a novel’s “program for cultivating the heart...constitute[s] a new and more effective method of policing” (15). D.A. Miller, following Foucault, calls this the “less visible, less visibly violent modes of ‘social control’” (vii). For him as for Armstrong, the “regime of the norm” propagated by nineteenth century novels centers on “the private and domestic sphere on which the very identity of the liberal subject depends” (viii-ix). Although the texts under consideration in this study did not necessarily circulate as widely as the novels that Armstrong or Miller examine, the same principle is at work.

The ingenious project of Western liberal culture operates with equal effect in modernizing nineteenth century Havana. What Foucault calls “discipline,” and which focuses primarily on technologies of sexuality and the self, becomes more transparent if we look at the literary texts. The following passage from the end of *El cólera en la Habana* reveals much about the author’s hope and intent about the novel’s reception. After the plague has passed, the city regains its naturalized “orden ordinario,” which consists primarily of hetero-normative erotic attachments:

Solterones juramentados, que habían experimentado sin duda durante la epidemia los horrores del celibato, buscaban alguna compañera que los librara de la soledad y el desamparo. Algunos que habían vivido en ilícitos amores, se apresuraban a santificar su unión con los vínculos de la iglesia, y muchos jóvenes desengañados de su libre y bulliciosa vida, buscaban más puros y sólidos placeres en los lazos del matrimonio (93).

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<sup>53</sup> Domingo Del Monte writes in 1838 that the Cuban writer at this time had to receive approval “primero con el censor regio, después con el sota-censor...y por último con el capitán general; de manera que es imposible que tras este triple filtro de las ideas se escape ninguna que valga algo” (Escritos).

In this way, novels could shape and guide the populace towards familial if not socio-political harmony. The “thematization of social discipline” begins at the most intimate level of social life, with the individual subject (Miller ix). The project “of bourgeois consolidation,” represented “through literal and figurative marriage,” can be seen throughout the nineteenth century (Sommer 19). If the harmonious nuclear family was an allegory for a peaceful polity, then novelists could do worse than to promote it.

Of course, the rhetorical strategies used to construct the bourgeois sentimental community in Cuba existed uneasily beside the economic and political tactics used to maintain both slavery and Spanish colonial hegemony. The successfully procreative Cuban family cannot be seen as a simple microcosm of the patriotic national body. The situation, soon to be reflected in the deviant desires within the Cuban family structure,<sup>54</sup> was far more complex than that. José Luis Ferrer, in his dissertation work on “Novela y Nación,” explains that the early Cuban novel “created” rather than “consolidated” the national imaginary (19). Thus, it functioned to plant the seed of patriotism rather than reflected its prior existence. Unlike the narratives that Sommer studies, Cuban fiction developed many decades *before* a Cuban nation-state was formed. “Por lo tanto,” writes Ferrer,

el grupo social que ‘produce’ o favorece el surgimiento de la novela en Cuba no lo hace desde el poder político de una nación-estado, como a menudo ocurre en otras partes del continente, sino desde una especie de ‘oposición’ política. Este sólo hecho determina ciertas características únicas de la narrativa cubana de estos años; la más notable, sin dudas, la de que su primer interés no sea resolver conflictos y atenuar tensiones (aunque en buena medida haga eso también), sino sobre todo señalar diferencias y contradicciones sociales con el fin de lograr un consenso político en contra del status quo colonial (19-20).

Gerard Aching summarizes the scholarly research on the topic by stating that what he defines as Cuba’s “colonial modernity” led to a “historical hypocrisy” prevalent in the much of Latin America and the Caribbean (29-31). Cuban intellectuals, as both Spanish colonial subjects and proponents of liberal Enlightenment “civilization,” found themselves in a discomforting double bind. They could not close the gap between concepts of universal freedom, on the one hand, and an economic prosperity dependent on chattel slavery, on the other. Their novels reflect—if not resolve—the anxiety of what Aching calls the “foundational duplicity” on which Cuban nationalism is based (31).

### **Conclusion: Social Reform**

In this context, meliorism—as distinguishable from optimism—can be characterized by the belief that social, political, and moral problems are not insurmountable, but malleable and repairable.<sup>55</sup> Yes, Cuban society was blighted by increasing skepticism about blind faith in Enlightenment principles of (European) liberalism, freedom, rationality, and industrial advancement. But its reformist members were also inspired by the possibility that social changes could reduce the pain and suffering of the Creole bourgeoisie, “enslaved,” as they liked to say

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<sup>54</sup> In addition to the novels mentioned above, see Villaverde’s *El perjuicio*, *La cueva de Taganana*, *El espetón de oro*, and *La cruz negra* for other works that offer an example of what Alvarez García calls “una imagen...muy expresiva de los mecanismos del sistema” colonial (30).

<sup>55</sup> For more on meliorism and social regeneration from a medical point of view, see Quinlan, especially Ch. 4.

they were, by the Spanish crown and the island's Peninsular representatives.<sup>56</sup> And if not all Cubans were well-off, white, and free, the liberal Creoles' hope was that someday they might be. Competing political strategies, for instance, suggested that Cuba could either be annexed to the US South, where plantation slavery was still the legal *orden ordinario*; or slowly "whitened" through the influx of European colonists. For instance, Francisco Arango y Parreño, as early as 1792, expressed the need to help "propagate" the white population of the island (*Discurso* 21). In the opposite political camp, Peninsulars aimed to maintain the slave trade in order to help prevent Cuban Creole independence from Spain. They deviously reasoned that the more blacks there were on the island, the harder it would be for white Creoles to strike out for statehood. The fiction writers of Domingo Del Monte's tertulia, amongst which we can include Palma, Del Valle, and Villaverde, shared the impotence and frustration of the liberal Euro-Creoles.

As we remember from the beginning of this chapter, disaster, and disease in particular, was the privileged metaphor for all that an expansive literary imagination and a belief in modern progress could overcome. As we saw in Chapter One, the cholera epidemic provided a timely opportunity for urban reform. This superficially successful operation couched its remapping of the city—the collective body—in biomedical terms. In parallel fashion, fiction worked to shape, educate, and discipline the subject—the individual body—in similarly normalizing language. Individuation is especially problematic in nineteenth century Cuba because of the multiple and competing layers of racial, social, class, and national identities. Yet social meliorism—the belief that the body and its desires could be positively molded and effectively converted into productive socio-political energy—permeated a plethora of discourses, from proto-urbanism to grammar to medicine to law.<sup>57</sup>

The allegory of productive romance is not the least compelling reason to read fiction such as *El cólera en la Habana*. Neither is its conscious policing of the Cuban social body. Yet what is most intriguing about this novel is the discursive link between the disease that forms its official title and the woman who is its actual object/subject. The first is personified as wild and terrifying (reminiscent of "la hembra-telúrica, la hembra de rompe y rasga") while the other is idealized as gentle and passive (like "la mujer-cielo, la mujer-ángel"); the former moves menacingly and defiantly while the latter acts purely and sweetly. Yet as disparate as they seem, both infiltrate the *intramuros* from some other place simultaneously. And each one contains some aspect of the other within its constitution.

If the modern nation is complex, the colonial modernity of the Cuban social body in the first half of the nineteenth century was far more so. Palma's archetypal Cuban woman, Angélica, embodies the "foundational duplicity" of Cuban society. For Aching, this term refers to the double-dealing and deceitfulness of a society both civilized and slave-owning. The word also alludes to the various double duties that many Cuban bodies, like that of Angélica, were required to perform: to function as both pure and contaminated, modern and antiquated, colonized and free, black and white, all at once. This doubling of identities is evidenced, for example, by the masquerade ball that opens *El cólera en la Habana*. The mask is the uncanny double for the putative "reality" that it covers. Doubling continues in the depictions of women—and especially those of mixed race—throughout Cuban literature and art.<sup>58</sup> To paraphrase French critic Jean Lamore, the figure of the mulata woman functions as a mask that both hides and reveals Cuba's

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<sup>56</sup> Among others, Villaverde famously writes, in his 1882 version of Cecilia Valdés, about his feelings "del esclavo en tierra esclava" (Prólogo 4). In a description of Leonaro, he laments that he thought little about politics and barely cared that "Cuba gemía esclava" (168).

<sup>57</sup> On this point, see Julio Ramos' *Paradojas de la letra*.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Vera Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets*, Claudette Williams' *Charcoal and Cinnamon*, or Lorna William's *The Representation of Slavery in Cuban Fiction*.

socio-moral ailments.<sup>59</sup> Woman represents that element in Cuban identity which cannot be discussed or depicted otherwise. The narrator of *El cólera* is drawn to this foundational duplicity as he struggles to discern his subject's moral character. Any possibility of a single foundational identity for Cuba is contaminated by masks and false appearances, or rather, by the discrepancy between appearance and essence. At the core of the fictional prose narratives that ponder this problem lies the uneasy suspicion that neither *ser* or *parecer* are very stable categories on their own.

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<sup>59</sup> Lamore argues that it is the mulata who functions as “una máscara para ocultar unas realidades menos amenas” (44). She is both an erotic object and an embodiment of *lo nacional*. See his introduction to the 2004 Cátedra edition of *Cecilia Valdés*.

## Chapter Four, “The Early Cecílias”

### Introduction: The “Cecilia Valdés” of *La Siempreviva* (1839)

While the putative object of study of *El cólera en la Habana* is the cholera epidemic and its paradoxically sanitizing effects, Cirilio Villaverde’s “Cecilia Valdés” (1839) unabashedly focuses on the eponymous protagonist.<sup>1</sup> Cecilia is an embodiment of what the young Villaverde, following his mentor Domingo Del Monte, sees as the Cuban condition, a flawed but perfectible set of social and political problems. The Delmontinos, says literary critic Ivan Schulman, shared “la idea de mejorar a los semejantes y reformar la sociedad” (Schulman 12). With these goals in mind, they used the Spanish literary current of *costumbrismo* to paint a romantic yet realist portrait of their own people, with the hopeful “propósito de corregir ciertos errores sociales, ciertas costumbres” (Schulman 13).

Just like *Carmen y Adela*, which Villaverde had undoubtedly read in the fall of 1838,<sup>2</sup> the main character, much like the island of Cuba that she represents, is immature at the beginning of the narration. There is no indication that Villaverde or his textual *Doppelgänger*, the narrator, was troubled by her age; in fact, extreme youth seems to be an asset in determining the capacity for rehabilitation. Faithful to the autobiographical form of this piece, he claims to have seen the girl with his own eyes some ten years previously:

Ocurríanos estas reflexiones, porque nos acordamos que, siendo aún estudiantes de filosofía, por los años de 1826 a 1827, casi diariamente nos encontrábamos al paso por la plazuela de Santa Catalina con una niña que entonces apenas tendría arriba de diez años de edad (“Cecilia Valdés” 183-84).

The apparent veracity of his account lends credibility to an otherwise biased judgement of Cecilia’s character.

Why would Villaverde, an aspiring writer, chose this girl in particular for what he calls his character study? The answer, as in *El cólera en la Habana*, is clear: Regardless of her youth, she *is* particular, “singular,” and “peculiar,” just like the strange and doubled identity of Cuba itself. Yet she is also the Cuban everywoman: “Nosotros creemos,” he says, “que cada pueblo tiene su índole peculiar” (“CV” 182-184). Cecilia replaces the individual with a character type.

Hay ciertas fisonomías, y de mujeres señaladamente, que se fijan de tal modo en la imaginación del que las observa con interés, que no es bastante a borrarlas el transcurso del tiempo; y como tenga aquel recorte, aquella suavidad de contornos, aquel acabamiento que distingue a las estatuas griegas, y que para desgracia nuestra abundan en países meridionales, siempre las lleva uno presente para establecer términos de comparación, en que regularmente se decide el alma por la que mora y se engrandece en fantasía (“CV” 184).

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<sup>1</sup> To differentiate between this story and the later *Cecílias*, I will refer to this version of the novel in quotations rather than italics.

<sup>2</sup> According to Del Valle, *Carmen y Adela* was published in the periodical *El Plantel* in Sept 1838 (*La vida literaria* 64, 70). I have yet to locate a copy of this original publication. There are indications that Villaverde read Del Valle’s work because Del Monte encouraged his students to share their writing with other members of his *tertulia*. Del Valle’s novel was not republished until 1895. Significantly, Villaverde, in the 1882 version of *Cecilia Valdés*, names Leonardo’s twin sisters Carmen and Adela.

Several details are important to note from the outset. First, despite her young age, she is described as if she were already a full-grown woman, a Greek statue, a familiar figure in the masculine imagination.<sup>3</sup> Thus, although the figure of a child implies room for physical-moral growth and maturity, she is seen as an already-finished portrait, a work of art *acabada*.<sup>4</sup> Second, it is to the detriment of her ostensibly passive observers that her type “abounds” in the Caribbean. This descriptive term likens her to passive tropical plant, not an active subject. Yet at the same time her observer fashions himself as an unfortunate bystander who happens—to his disgrace—to catch this girl in his field of vision. He eschews all responsibility for his actions, reversing the blame for his affliction. Third, the narrator very nearly admits that this figure is a fantastical product of his imagination; he acts as if he can bring forth her image “para establecer términos de comparación” whenever he chooses. Yet this girl, despite her apparent passivity, has already rooted herself solidly in his mind; she refuses to retreat from his thoughts. In his construction of Woman, she is already carrying out the project—unconscious or instinctual—of undermining the social order and the coherent subjectivity of the male narrator. To sum up: this is not a realist, *costumbrista* portrait or an objective reproduction. It is a romanticized daydream. Even if Cecilia is “aquella” familiar “niña que” “encontrábamos” with regularity; she is also a metaphor for a desire unleashed, a magical conjuration that will not simply disappear.

The duplicitous—competing and contradictory—descriptions continue. The narrator is enticed and disturbed by his own account of Cecilia’s attributes. She is innocent, “pure,” “delicada,” “vivacious,” “happy,” and “jovial” (“CV” 184, 186). But her large dark eyes, like the windows to Carmen’s soul in Chapter Two, give temperamental flashes of lightning;<sup>5</sup> her “mirada” is “rápida, penetrante, dura” (184). On the one hand, she is a “perfect” “modelo acabado de belleza,” with an “expresión de gloria anunciada en su sonrisa;” her neck is “una armonía encantadora” likened to “la base de una copa” (184). Yet tellingly, her forehead is “un tanto comprimida de las sienas,” and her upper lip is “casi siempre soliviantado” and hostile, full of potential “desaire[s]” or “repulsa[s] agria[s]” for the shunned suitor (184). She *appears* as a graceful two-dimensional portrait, “una de las muchas que se atribuyen al diestro pincel de Urbino” (184). Yet she is never fully replicable; she communicates “cierta bizzarria y animación difícil de retratar” (184). Something about the Cuban everywoman successfully escapes representation.

The asymmetry of Cecilia’s facial features—the underdevelopment of the frontal region of the skull, the oversized lips—are associated in the nineteenth century with the “primitive” physiognomy of black women and prostitutes. Her “compressed” cranium could be a prototype of the atavistic character types theorized later in the century by phrenologists.<sup>6</sup> If such is the case, then the Cuban authors who scanned cranial attributes for signs of impure essence were some of the most “advanced” racial scientists of their time. A misshapen head is one of what Cesare Lombroso would later call one of the “physical stigmata” that mark the disease and disfunction of the “dangerous classes” such as women and the poor. For Cecilia, these stigmata could include her rebellious upper lip,<sup>7</sup> her flashing eyes, her hard, penetrating gaze. These

<sup>3</sup> What Sander Gilman writes of Nana could well apply here: her “childlike face is but a mask which conceals the hidden disease buried within, the corruption of sexuality” (“Black Bodies, White Bodies” 254).

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Ezponda contrasts the face of the mulata with the rest of her body: “No busquemos en las líneas de su fisonomía, ni la regularidad, ni las proporciones de la belleza griega. Ostenta, en cambio, las más acabadas formas en el resto del cuerpo, y una gracia voluptuosa que no reúnen ni la Venus de Médicis ni la Dafne” (11).

<sup>5</sup> “...las cejas arqueadas formando casi ángulo en el punto con dos ojos negros y grandes relampagueando bajo las lenguas pestañas” (184).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cesare Lombroso’s *La donna delinquente*, 1893.

<sup>7</sup> Juan Gelpí notes that the lips represent not only the “vulgar” orality of commoners, or an excess of sensuality, but “un espacio en al que se encuentran los contrarios o, dicho de otro modo, como una parte del rostro en la que se confunden el ser y el parecer” See “El discurso jerárquico en Cecilia Valdés,” 55-6.

masculinized traits point to an improper gendering in addition to the cranio-racial marking. The “*seemingly* beautiful physiognomy” of the deviant woman, writes Sander Gilman, masks an “atavistic nature” discernible to the “scientific” eye of a pathologist (248) (my emphasis).

Phrenology became a late nineteenth century obsession, but scientific racism was already predominant in Europeanized cultures by the eighteenth century. As early as 1775, for example, Johann Lavater began to publish physiognomical studies in which a subject’s appearance was considered a manifestation of his inner self.<sup>8</sup> He also compared the arched perfection of the unmarked Germanic forehead with the relative disproportion of the African one (Lavater 243). In 1810, the south African woman Saartjie Baartman became the icon of female atavism when the “stigmata” of her genitalia and buttocks were represented as “primitive.”<sup>9</sup> The academic response to Baartman shows that French Enlightenment medical thinkers harbored an obsession with racialized degeneration and societal decline that predates the era of scientific positivism.

Instead of pessimistically hypothesizing a fundamental barbarity, however, the narrator of “Cecilia Valdés” has other plans. He is more interested in condemning the malevolent influences that sully her character, the “*graves faltas de sus asociados*” that poison society itself (“CV” 183). Cuba’s *asociados* are no doubt the peninsular authorities who oversee local government; Cecilia’s are her negligent adult guardians. Some of these *graves faltas*, such as her “*oscura existencia*,” the foul sediment of her “inheritance,” and the “*mala acción*” of her progenitors, point to events beyond her control. These are the essentialized components of her history that cannot be remedied. Likewise, Cuba’s original sins of slavery and colonialism will not be erased. But rather than fundamental defects, Cecilia’s flaws are in fact mostly the result of inadequate adult discipline and care, of a society “que [no] ha cuidado de su infancia” (183).<sup>10</sup> For example, Cecilia’s lively resistance to realistic painterly representation reflects her unwillingness to submit to the legitimate authority of a respectable Creole *letrado* such as the narrator. But who can blame the child for inadequate parenting? And who can blame Cuba for Spain’s corrupt governance?

By the time he tries to describe her, it is already too late for Cecilia to start life anew. She is an orphan who never knew her parents. Her history is marked by her abandonment.<sup>11</sup> Yet if Cecilia is meant to be a synecdoche for Cuban society—and it seems that she is in these first few paragraphs—these characteristics highlight Villaverde’s non-essentialist focus on the possibility for dramatic social change. Instead of stagnating in pessimistic determinism, his critical descriptions of the protagonist’s less-than-perfect facial physiognomy<sup>12</sup> emphasize the urgent need for responsible care of the public façade—if not the entire social body—of Cuba. He implies that every member of the Cuban polity—and indeed, Cuba itself—could be open to reform. Fiction, then, becomes his workshop for the observation and criticism of what is wrong with Cecilia and with society, as well as an implicit vision of how to remedy it.

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<sup>8</sup> See Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*.

<sup>9</sup> See Sander Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies;” McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, Ch. 1; the Séance du 29 janvier 2002 of the French *Sénat*; the “Proposition de loi;” and the *Loi* No. 2002-323 (6 Mar. 2002).

<sup>10</sup> The words “su infancia” indicate a slippage in the distinction between Cecilia and her society. Whose infancy is being discussed? Pleas for proper *cuidado* could apply equally to both. In fact, the first two pages of Villaverde’s short story reveal a scantily-veiled critique of brutal colonial domination: “...si se extravía, si se corrumpe, la culpa es de aquellos que se han constituido en reguladores de su marcha continua y progresiva, de aquellos que saben y pueden y no comprendieron sus necesidades, sus exigencias, y no supieron, o no quisieron conducirlo a un fin laudable y humanitario” 182-83.

<sup>11</sup> Lucila Farinas notes that in this story it is unclear whether Cecilia had passed through the *Casa Cuna* or not. See “Las dos versiones de Cecilia Valdés.”

<sup>12</sup> As Eduardo Ezponda writes in 1878, “Carece la mulata de perfecciones artisitcas en el rostro” (11).

## The Science of Woman

Analytical empiricism was at its height in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Once again, France was a leader in the promotion and diffusion of this scientific movement. After the French Revolution, civic leaders developed ambitious plans for the rehabilitation of society. The human body was a useful tool in the articulation of these projects. Scientific naturalists like the Comte de Buffon used their descriptive analyses of the biological body—the so-called “science of man”—to attempt to explain the entirety of the observable world. Their broad claims about human nature were intended to lead to concrete rehabilitation of the body social. For instance, according to Elizabeth Williams: “The science of man embraced during the Revolution was on the whole ‘optimistic’ in its vision of humanity’s future” (2). Key to the scientific vision of communal health was the ubiquitous concept of “the physical and the moral,” the widespread belief in the interdependence between the outward, physical domain of human experience and the inner, psychic one (Williams 8). Another defining feature was the simplistic reduction of human variety to certain character “types” defined by “constitution, temperament, age, sex, climate, disease, [or] race” (9). The influence of the French-led “science of man” is evident in Cuban periodicals such as *La Moda, o Recreo semanal del bello sexo*, where it was common to find instructions such as the following: “Para conocer a las mujeres es preciso examinarlas de la cabeza a los pies, midiéndolas, sobre poco mas o menos, como se mide un pescado de la cabeza a la cola” (“Filosofía moral” 246). The reader is left uncertain as to whether the measurement refers to a fish, a woman, or a mermaid. The justification for these visual measurements was the claim that they led to fundamental truths about Woman’s character as “type.”

For the human body as well as the social body, physical vibrancy and visibly apparent cleanliness were said to be signs of inner rectitude and moral purity. However, as Villaverde intimates in his unsettling descriptions of the young Cecilia, it was important not to judge moral character (*ser*) by appearance (*parecer*) alone. In a society like Cuba, where social mobility often meant racial ambiguousness, experience taught that *las apariencias engañan*. In Cuba, what appears to be is not always what *is*. While Cecilia seems open-hearted, natural, and frank, she also has “la maña de ocultar” her cravings for praise “con cierta *aparente* modestia; pues desde que salió del cascarón...halló a mano un *disfraz*, con el cual se presentó siempre en espectáculo al pueblo” (“CV” 186-87) (my emphasis). Cecilia disguises her true pretensions and ambition with the mask of disinterest; she performs innocence by appearing modest. All the while she profits from prudent advice without revealing her secrets to others. This is all the more disturbing because she is only a child. The treachery here is not that she is a nimble social climber—so, we remember, was Angélica—nor that she effectively capitalizes on her good looks. It is rather that she takes pains to hide the truth behind the façade of purity.

For physiologists who believed in progress and social change, proper, “hygienic” bodily practices could reform one’s character and purify one’s soul (Quinlan 125). According to the social medicine that they promoted, regeneration of the ailing body was possible through the rigorous application of sanitary discipline. Physical and moral hygiene, when applied to personal interactions like sex, would lead to a more smoothly functioning polity. For medical historian Sean Quinlan, care of the self in nineteenth century France—often connotative of normalized sexual behavior—was discursively linked to a broader political wellbeing. Ideally, proper education, personal hygiene, and (re)productive sexuality could lead “organically” or even biologically to social peace. On a physical level, regulation of impure thoughts and actions would guarantee communal equilibrium and health (Quinlan 125-26).

In Cuba, of course, lack of political, economic, or racial cohesion rendered social harmony all but impossible. As personifications of transgressive desire, the racially duplicitous offspring of nonnormative sexual behavior visibly marked the urban scene. Cecilia, of course, is one of them. Significantly, however, race is not the first attribute that delineates her physical-moral self. Rather, it is her organic connection to illegitimacy, deviance, and disguise. While Villaverde does not explicitly mention Cuba's foundational duplicity, this concern lurks behind the entire narration. In addition, considering that the story's first several paragraphs denounce the corruption of the colonial regime, it is easy to see how Cecilia becomes a natural offspring of this scandalous lawlessness. On the fourth page of his story, the narrator relates the gossip circulating about her obscure origins. After discussing one possibility, he provides another:

Quién, por el contrario, con mejores informes, como que lo supo de boca de la mismísima comadre, mulata medio bruja y medio gente que se pintaba sola para esos casos de apuros y escondites, afirmaba por todos los santos del calendario que la madre de aquella chicuela era una mulatica engañada por un caballero; y, con este motivo, que debía de ser mitad noble y mitad plebeya: una cosa que es y no es, o que parece entrambos y ninguna de las dos es en realidad de verdad (“CV” 185).

In the twisted logic of this run-on sentence, legitimacy accrues only to whiteness. A mulata is only half-human, and the daughter of a mulata is both a doubled subject and a nobody. This does not bode well for a society in which one quarter of the population consisted of blacks and mulatos, over half of whom were women.<sup>13</sup> Hybrid individuals, seen as carriers of literal or metaphoric disease, were relentlessly targeted for hygienic disciplining. Still, it was believed that a collective emphasis on self-regulation and care could lead to a moral rehabilitation of the social body as a whole. Rebellious characteristics such as those manifested by Cecilia render it all the more pressing that society, like a disobedient youngster, be forcibly yoked to the civilizing and modernizing projects promoted by literature.

### **The Centrality of *Cuidado***

Villaverde's protagonist is Exhibit A in his case to convince his readers of the urgent need for everyone (or at least those unable to look after themselves) to submit attentive policing by the proper civic authorities, such as educated writers like himself. The young Cecilia, like Cuban society, lacks the maturity and the capacity to adequately care for itself. In fact, at times Cecilia seems to lack agency altogether. The author uses botanical metaphors to explain her helplessness, the dire state of her predicament, but also his melioristic attitude toward social change. Uninhibited by the social norms or expectations that would regulate her behavior, Cecilia grows up like “una hermosa flor” in an abandoned garden (“CV” 197). She is “gallarda y lozana,” vigorous and robust, but careless, “sin cuidarse de las investigaciones y murmuraciones de que e[s] objeto” (185). Like any living being, she receives her nutrients from whatever is around her. Hungry for any adult model available to her, she “feeds off” the smutty and profane examples of a “pueblo soez y desmoralizado” (186). Later, Villaverde compares her to “la flor que brota de un tronco seco” (196). Cecilia is not made for the misery and squalor in which she lives; yet she is delighted to wallow in it because she knows nothing else; she has not been taught that her behavior is indecent. Her “tierno corazón, formado acaso para abrigar todas las virtudes que hermosean la existencia de una mujer buena,” only internalizes that which surrounds her,

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<sup>13</sup> See Luz Mena, “Stretching the Limits” 90.

namely “las lecciones más pervertidoras” from a miasmatically contaminated urban social body. Unfortunately, childhood is too short when so exposed to such a steamy climate. Instead of ingesting healthy feminine virtues, as she supposedly would if she were confined to her home,<sup>14</sup> “... se nutr[e] con los excesos de lascivia e impudicia...” proffered by the sordid citizen body of which she is an active part (186).

The biological language of nourishment, (“nutrir”) sprouting (“brotar”), and flowering (“flor”) reinforces the ideas of organic growth, movement, and change. It also points to the importance of environment in the transmission of values to its inhabitants. In biomedical terminology, Villaverde links miasma theories of contaminated ambience with contagionist theories of individual disease propagation. In other words, to follow the floral metaphor, while a plant passively absorbs the smutty air around it, medical illness is actively transmitted from one person to the next. Thus Cecilia is not only a submissive object, but also a possibly pathological subject. The repeated mention of perverting “lessons” emphasizes the importance of education and instruction in forming one’s character. But it also points to some degree of agency, the capacity to learn. The rhetorical mention of woman’s moral malleability alludes to the possibility of feminine purification and perfectability through the somatic and mental hygiene promoted by the Euro-Creole male author. Virtue, an acquired quality, “beautifies” the body and mind of its subject through her voluntary compliance with the norms of social morality. Villaverde suggests that, with adequate pruning, espaliering, clipping, and shaping, this delicate flower of Cuban youth could be guided to grow into a morally upright member of society. His discursive emphasis on growth and change reflects Villaverde’s early dream that all but the most intransigent members of the population could be cleansed or purified of their unenlightened customs. Through virtuous and chaste bodily practices, Cecilia and her ilk can be rehabilitated. Instead, she is as neglected as a lanky weed. She is left to roam the streets on her own, an activity which turns her (ab)errant tendencies into a solidified habit.

### Vagrancy and the Street

José Antonio Saco confirms in his lamentations on Cuban vagrancy the unfortunate effects of, the active repetition of a behavior: “el hábito tiene a veces en los vicios más influjo que la perversidad del corazón” (*Memoria sobre la vagancia* 32). For Saco, only the most innate of criminals is conceptually cordoned off from the character reform effected by good habits. Crucially, actions are more influential in shaping disposition than one’s inborn qualities. Villaverde seems to agree with Saco’s assessment. Whatever Cecilia’s initial flaws, her daily practices—“su vida vagabunda y callejera”—play a far greater role in shaping her character than any native tendency toward depravity (“CV” 185). Cecilia’s heart may very well be inclined “by nature” toward perversity. She is, after all, the spurious “hechura del crimen” of illegitimacy and racial ambiguity. The obscure origin of her “sangre con mancha” does dangerously predispose her toward impaired judgment and disobedience (203). However, as William Luis notes in his analysis of the novel, even this unclean “inheritance” of racialized deviance is understood to transmit itself only to the fifth generation, after which point the blood presumably becomes whitewashed or purified (Luis, “Cecilia Valdés” 18). By this account, participating in physical *blanqueamiento*—as Cecilia’s foremothers have—will eventually rinse or bleach any criminal tendencies, along with the dark color, out of her family line. Hygienic bodily practices lead to purified souls and blanched bodies.<sup>15</sup> In this way, sexual liaisons with a white man actually

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<sup>14</sup> The home, however, is also a space of intense female intimacy. See Ch. 2.

<sup>15</sup> For a brilliant historical analysis of *limpieza de sangre*, see María Elena Martínez’s *Genealogical Fictions*.

acquire a positive valence. Although a smoldering “sediment” of inflamed “sangre abrasadora” still remains in Cecilia’s bloodline, her race is not the primary factor determining her fate (Villaverde, “Cecilia Valdés” 203). In fact, according to Luis’ calculations, Cecilia’s daughter, as a fifth-generation mulata *blanqueada*, would be cleansed of racial impurities. Her understandable desire to sanitize her bloodline is not the chief concern.<sup>16</sup> It is true that the mulata is caught in a double bind because she cannot justify the unchaste, adulterous means with which she seeks to reach a whitened, purified end. However, the main cause of her downfall is her constant indulgence in immoral activity, the incontinent vagrancy dramatized in the vice-ridden, unlawful public space of the street.

For Saco, the street is the site of vagrancy and excess par excellence. Urban open spaces abound with invisible diseases, immorality, and most of all, dangerous models of social deviance. These are the places where respectable people do not linger. The street is the space of the poor and the outcast, of those “dangerous classes” who have no place in society. Luz Mena notes that while vagrancy was most prevalent among unemployed white men, the Habanese street in the 1830s and ’40s became the uncontested territory of blacks and mulattos.<sup>17</sup> Thus vagrancy became associated with the darker underclasses. In literature, it is the site where a limitless barbaric passion—the Other to the modern Self—is consistently ignited. Passion, a feminized trait, is associated with lack<sup>18</sup> of control and excess of emotion. Lower class or working women, generally represented as overly sexual, inhabited this public space, as did drunkards, gamblers, the lazy, the unemployed, the ex-slaves. To be associated with the street was to be assigned a no-place in society. This is why a properly gendered lady like Angélica is content to be restricted to the (relative) safety of the private home. There her “natural” feminine excess could be contained.

Saco cites street-side activities such as gambling and lottery playing as pernicious inciters of that elusive characteristic: vice. For the unenlightened populace, what may begin as innocent curiosity about these wicked customs becomes too quickly transformed into full-fledged passion for excitement and risk. An eroticized desire for such stimulation, personified as a feminized Fury, “assaults” its unanchored victims, “encendiendo una pasión que ya no pueden reprimir” (*Memoria* 35). Although Saco doesn’t let these stupefied *ociosos* off the hook, he places most of the blame for such passion on the practices themselves and the space where they are enacted. The street is the miasmatic environment where the vulnerable masses of “incauta juventud” receive their perverse lessons (“su funesto aprendizaje”) in vice. Following their fancy, these continually listless loafers “se entregarán a rienda suelta a la pasión que los arrastra” (*Memoria* 39). Through the constant internalization of insidious examples, the childlike, impressionable public is dragged downward (literally “arrastrado”) toward iniquity.

In a similar way, Cecilia, who begins life with a cheerful disposition, falls into bad habits through her contact with the street. Villaverde echoes Saco when he laments the source of her demise. “De índole naturalmente buena y pacífica, con el continuo ver lo que pasaba en las calles, con el dar rienda suelta a las pasiones, cambiósse del todo su carácter” (“CV” 202). Much is being said in these two short lines, which on their own could summarize the entire *cuento*. First, it is clear that the city streets have a powerful, pernicious influence over character

<sup>16</sup> Lucila Farinas argues that “Villaverde, en esa época, no tenía el propósito de considerar el mestizaje como uno de los temas de la obra, sino que escribió un cuento con propósito moralizante...” (160-61).

<sup>17</sup> See “No Common Folk” 16, 27, 115, as well as “Stretching the Limits.”

<sup>18</sup> Eduardo Ezponda associates the mulata with *deliquio*, lack (15). Later, Freud will characterize Woman as inherently lacking, based on her lack of male genitalia. See “Female Sexuality.” Excess, on the other hand, is associated with the uncontrolled lasciviousness of the prostitute and the black woman. See Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies.”

formation. Second, the narrator leads us to believe that in contrast, Cecilia already has almost no dominion over herself. For example, it is unclear who (if anyone) gives free rein to passion, because no active subject presents itself. It seems, rather, that poor Cecilia is swept away by sinful desire (or the devil) itself. Third, and most importantly, it seems that one's "natural" inclinations toward self-indulgence or vice can in fact be redirected. The statement cited above implies that such moral malleability has the potential to transform an embodied character either into a positive or negative shape. In Cecilia's case, the evil of "lo que pasaba" in the street osmoses into her body through her sense of sight ("ver"). This unfortunate deformation also leads the reader to understand that, in contrast, proper, healthy, and edifying customs like reading, writing, or "illuminating" conversation—which Saco calls "diversiones tan inocentes como provechosas"—could also filter into an individual in the same fashion, thus reforming her (*Memoria* 39). Villaverde's brief mention of these activities could be read as a didactic emphasis on moral improvement.

The negative influence of the street is reinforced elsewhere in the tale. Running through the city ("azotando calles," "CV" 199), even for the hardest of souls, is a habit-forming activity. The law of inertia implies that her wanderings will continue indefinitely unless somehow curtailed. This aberrant practice becomes, for Cecilia, a vicious cycle that spirals out of control. Excessive indulgence in pleasurable but unproductive physical digressions leads to moral deviance and disorder: "ella siempre siguió haciendo su gusto o capricho, unas veces escapándose por la ventanilla, otras aprovechándose del momento en que la mandaba a la taberna, para andarse de calle en calle y de plaza en plaza, todo el santo día de Dios..." ("CV" 201). What starts as an innocent whim, *gusto*, or *capricho* leads to an addiction to a life of *vagancia*, which in turn gives birth to the more formidable "passion," a formidable desire that overtakes her. It is as if the evil present in the city's orderly gridded streets lies in wait, like a predatory Harpy, anxious to devour its wandering, hapless prey.

A romanticized but belittled Cecilia often seems to lack the power to care for herself. Like a dazed and confused baby bird in a fictional-scientific metaphor, Cecilia "sale del nido a ver la luz y las flores" ("CV" 207). In another organic simile, no sooner does she stray into unknown pastures than she is led "como la oveja al aprisco, y no pocas a las garras del lobo" (183).<sup>19</sup> The hungry wolf lying in wait to prey on its ovine victim could be the unchecked passion of the narrator himself, but it is embodied in the white Creole scapegoat Leocadio Gamboa. A member of the decadent oligarchy fattened on extortion and duplicitous deals with the colonial authorities, Leocadio represents the deplorable lack of moral probity characteristic of the *sacarocracia*, the aristocracy of sugar barons. In this tale he is the deceptive, irreformable "ocioso encubierto" incapable of the moral uplift that Villaverde seeks to impart (Saco, *Memoria* 37). Worse, he is the feminized "primer petimetre de la Habana" with a delicate "cabeza perfumada," a fine silk vest and an untamable "corazón de los trópicos" ("CV" 205). An improperly gendered, flamboyant fop, Leocadio is also a hardened vagrant: his errance from the moral straight and narrow path has ossified into an essential characteristic. As wickedness incarnate, he demonstrates "el depravado intento" of seducing his gullible victim. He is the arrogant force that ignites her latent desires "al extremo de enloquecerla y llevarla humilde" to the sacrificial altar ("CV" 207). In pitiful response, Cecilia becomes a mindless "cordero, a los pies de su sacrificador," whom he drags swiftly and victoriously along the road to perdition (207). Despite Villaverde's half-hearted attempts to bestow the power of moral choice upon his female protagonist, the aggressive vortex of Leo's desire swallows up Cecilia's initially

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<sup>19</sup> Note that the sheepfold is generally understood to be a safe, protective place; here it is merely a trap.

promising character. However, behind this emphasis on passion as elsewhere or Other to the Self comes the suspicion that Cecilia might have some agency; she might be a desiring subject herself. At one point, Villaverde counters his objectification of her by giving, as Schulman says, “la defensa de [su] autonomía sicológica” : “Cecilia, con sus palabras de niña, nos dirá lo que piensa y cómo piensa” (Schulman 17, Villaverde, “CV” 188). Cecilia as full subject can never be recovered from this autobiographical memory, but the ghost of her forgotten personhood haunts the rest of the narrative.

Before they become all-engulfing passions, Villaverde suggests that one’s natural proclivities toward vagrancy or vice can in fact be induced to grow and expand—like an espaliered tree—in a wholesome and upright, gracious or even beautiful direction. Here he didactically narrates Saco’s mandate that society foment “una revolución en las costumbres,” although his language is less blunt than Saco’s (*Memoria* 36). Villaverde proposes that vigilant, authoritative control should replace the “holgura” and “libre albedrío” comprising Cecilia’s upbringing. The corrupt Leocadio cannot be productively submitted to such instruction, but the protagonist is young enough and sufficiently malleable enough to warrant restraint. The wayward mulata, like her society, requires “cuidados,” a system of external behavioral checks and balances, to spare her from the moral contamination rampant in the city. Such care could be a key component of individual and social improvement (“CV” 186). For example, the narrator suggests that the natural “voluntariedad” of a carefree (or *careless*) individual could be thoughtfully cured with specific “frenos,” “obstáculos,” and “cortapisas a sus deseos” (187). Since the object of his critique seems unable to curtail her own excess, she requires an autonomous subject—a male steward—to govern and control her. In a series of rhetorical statements, Villaverde emphasizes the need for attentive policing, presumably by society’s *ilustrados*. Though interspersed with deterministic descriptions of her physique, these questions display an open-ended quality. They reveal the importance of communal education, discipline, and moral hygiene for his plan of social reform:

¿Qué hacía, pues, una niña tan linda, sola de día y de noche por las calles de la ciudad? ¿No tenía una escuela donde le enseñaran a coser, leer y escribir alguna cosa? ¿No tenía una abuela, siquiera una parienta que por caridad cuidase de su educación, o al menos que le vedase el estar perennemente azotando calles, como perros hambrientos y sin dueño (“CV” 185)?

This passage is problematic because at times Cecilia is depicted as an innocent child at the mercy of a myriad pernicious influences on her life. In this scene, however, she is compared to a pack of wild dogs, the carriers and spreaders of the most feared of contagious diseases: rabies. Villaverde seems unable to make up his mind about this girl. On the one hand, he prefers to blame the nebulous “society” for her downfall; on the other, he refuses to let her off the hook. He appears to be struggling against the determinism which, Schulman notes, shaped Cuba’s intellectual atmosphere at the time.<sup>20</sup> If race and socioeconomic class determine a character’s destiny at birth, then the theological concept of free will has no breathing room. Cecilia’s excessive freedom, then, is only a cruel and temporary illusion.

By the end of the century, the determinism of naturalist French writers had overtaken any kernel of hope for social reform. By 1882, after forty more years of living with the harsh realities of Cuban history, Villaverde would accept this determinism more fully. He would dismiss his

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<sup>20</sup> See Schulman’s note 27 of his Prólogo.

protagonist—and indeed, his entire native land—as a hopeless case. But with this initial story, he is not yet familiar with those depths of despair to which his narrative and its author would fall. Indeed, his emphasis here is on education, protection, vigilance, and care.

It is true that in the above passage, the key verbs *enseñar*, *cuidar*, *vedar* are expressed in the past subjunctive, demonstrating their temporal and modal impossibility. Of course, it can be argued that due to her socio-racial illegitimacy and her permanent displacement from the safety of a proper home, Cecilia is doomed from the start. Yet this passage focuses on behavior rather than essence, habit rather than substance. The concept of *cuidado*—diligence, attention, care, and health, repeated so many times in this story—would not be so central if rehabilitation were impossible. Drastic moral and political developments could yet pump life into the ill social body. Decisive changes (for the better or for the worse) seem imminent. The narrator expresses the fervent hope that the Cuban pathology can be cured with proper civic care of the Cuban self.

In stark contrast, Leocadio's lawlessness is virtually irremediable. His desire for deviance, his passion for excess, cannot be educated out of him. The narrator remarks sarcastically that “se podía decir de él lo que de algunos muchachos, que aunque entraron en la escuela, la escuela no entró ellos” (“CV” 205). He is truly a wolf in sheep's clothing, a dangerous masked figure who is not, at heart, what he appears to be:

¡Qué joven tan democrático!, diría cualquiera; ¡éste es el representante de la civilización de su país! Qué fisonomía tan franca, qué nobleza, qué despejo, qué hidalguía! ... ¡Pero qué chasco se llevaba quien tal pensase! Debajo de un chaleco de seda, es verdad, palpataba un corazón de los trópicos; mas dentro de aquella cabeza perfumada bullía, si era que bullía, un alma vulgar, indigna de personal tan hermoso, incapaz de virtudes, ni de pensamientos nobles y elevados (“CV” 206).

Whether aristocratic pretensions are distorted by the tropical environment, whether (certain) Cubans are naturally perverse, or whether it is normal for Cuban appearance to be so far removed from Cuban essence, the fact remains that some of society's offspring are truly dangerous, according to Villaverde. The troubling certainty regarding the bourgeoisie's vanity, hypocrisy, and even immorality concerns many, if not all, Cuban writers of this era.<sup>21</sup> At the heart of their distress lies the suspicion that their society itself is based on an illegitimate premise, a spurious proposition: that of the unhappy, disavowed mutual dependency of black/white, slave/owner, exploiter/exploited. No amount of philosophizing can circumvent this pervasive sense of bourgeois self-disgust.

While the focus remains on reformation through proper education, *cuidado* is by no means a panacea; not everyone is receptive to Saco's plan of collective Euro-Creole *ilustración*. It seems that women, the fleshy bodies through which society reproduces itself, are more morally and physically pliable<sup>22</sup> than men. While Leocadio was exposed to advanced schooling and yet refused to internalize it, poor Cecilia never even received the most basic instruction in domestic hygiene (“CV” 186). If she had, the author implies, her future would almost certainly have been more hopeful.

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<sup>21</sup> See José Luis Ferrer, Ch.s 6-8 on early Cuban novelists, Cecilia Valdés p. 206, and Schulman's “Prólogo” on Villaverde and the Del Monte circle, to name just a few of many sources.

<sup>22</sup> Two examples: Cuban women, according to Ramón de Palma, are by composed of “blandura” and “flexibilidad” (*El cólera* 51); Eduardo Ezponza admires the mulata's “flexibilidad” and “dulzura” (10).

## Pessimistic Foresight

Running parallel to what I call the reformist current in Villaverde's writing, however, is a darker, more violent one, a discourse of internal racism. Perhaps it can be characterized by what Ann Laura Stoler calls the "discursive production of unsuitable participants in the body politic" (*Race* 62). This exclusionary thinking suggests a set of irremediably abnormal members of the body social. On the one hand, both these characters and the exclusions that they represent—like the *pharmakos*<sup>23</sup> of the city—are necessary "to ensure the well-being and very survival of the social body" (*Race* 62). On the other, as subjects in their own right, these rejected beings permanently threaten society from the inside. However, those indefinitely excluded from the social body are more numerous than the Greek *pharmakos*; in fact, they are victims of what Stoler calls a "bifurcation [of the] social fabric" (*Race* 60). This indicates that these Others include literally half of a given population. They are therefore more threatening than a deviant few who have been ritually scapegoated. In addition, they pose another problem; that of agency. If Cecilia as an agentless object is unable to regulate herself, perhaps she, as well as others like her, can be manipulated into submission. But there remains (for Villaverde) the possibility that she does have some capacity of her own to grow and to change. This agency is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it means that she is capable of physical-moral improvement. On the other, it signals the dangerous presence of a free will resistant to technologies of control. For instance, if Cecilia, as an agential subject, is *unwilling* to submit to social discipline, then she is not simply a defective member or "unsuitable participant," but rather an active internal enemy of Cuban society (*Race* 64).

The meaning of this shadowy discourse is rendered all the more complex by the fact that Cuba at this point is not a nation-state. A community manufactures its enemies as part of its attempt at self-determination. But the construction of foes interior to society transgresses all types of social structures. Foucault, for instance, does not articulate the need for a nation-state when he states in a 1976 lecture: "The social body is basically articulated around two races" (*Society* 60). If we agree with his assessment, then any society can be understood as internally divided. Cecilia, then, represents half of the binary conception of the social body at war with itself. Foucault's explanatory statement that "we must defend society against all the biological dangers of that other race, of that sub-race, of that counter-race that despite ourselves we are constituting" could well apply to this novel (*Society* 55). The "we" is the urban bourgeoisie; the "other race" literally comprises everyone who cannot or will not meet the rigid expectations of a "society of normalization."<sup>24</sup>

Still, the dark wave of pessimism I mention here is but an undercurrent in this early version of the novel. Villaverde concentrates not on essence but on hygiene. He expresses his disgust at the putrid miasma of a sick city, lamenting its effects on the impressionable young. He pities the pathetically helpless adolescent, like Cecilia, in desperate need of guidance, who absorbs the urban contagion through every orifice. Unlike Angélica, she is not protected by the walls of her paternal home. She lacks both parental discipline and proper shelter.

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<sup>23</sup> For Derrida, the *pharmakos* are the permanent scapegoats of society, those who are used "as a purification and a remedy to the suffering city....The city's body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity...by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression." But, he notes, "the representative of the outside is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside" (133) (emphasis in original).

<sup>24</sup> Villaverde alludes to this "other race" when he mentions that Cecilia's love of music and dance "no desmentía su raza" and comments on "el estado febril de su sangre" (201). In this version of the novel, pessimism and meliorism are enemy armies engaged in never-ending battle.

¿Y cómo librarse de semejante influjo, que ejerce tanto imperio sobre las cabezas jóvenes y ardientes? ¿Cómo impedir que aquellos vivarachos ojos no viesen? ¿Cómo impedir que aquellas orejas siempre alertas no oyesen? ¿Que aquella alma rebosando vida y amor no deseara y no se asomara, antes de aclarar, a los ojos y las orejas para juzgar de cuanto pasaba a su alrededor, en vez de dormir el sueño de la inocencia? Bien temprano, por Dios, llamó a su puerta la legión de pasiones que gastan el corazón e inclinan las frentes más soberbias (“CV” 186-87).<sup>25</sup>

The deviant subject is neither completely recalcitrant nor irreparably lost. Villaverde blames himself, and colonial society, for the sad outcome of this version of the *Cecilia* story. The influences of a poisonous atmosphere, manifested by the lascivious seducer Leocadio, overpower the vital forces of unprotected feminine youth. An inhabitant of a noxious environment, however pure her potential, cannot escape the infection of her surroundings. Even the most vivacious, robust individual is bound to internalize the disease. She imbibes the contamination through the eyes, ears, and nose, and ingests the contagion through the slightest contact. Unfortunately, like a sponge swept over a dirty table, the protagonist has soaked up more of the sordid immorality than of the edifying thoughts available through reading or good conversation or *ilustración*. The evil “legión” of immoral individuals, like a giant collective bacteria, has destroyed all of the sponge’s fibers, all of the neighborhoods of the city, all of the members of the social body. Like an enemy army, passion has razed the city to the ground. If Cecilia is any example, the future does not bode well for the Cuban populace.

The particular object of this study is not destined to escape intact. Instead, she, like her island, is described as an “hermosa flor arrojada en mitad de una plaza para que la hollasen los pies del primer transeúnte” (“CV” 197). Despite its romanticized depiction of an individual, this passage—when read alongside Villaverde’s definitive novel on the decadent, deteriorating Cuban nation—is an uncannily accurate prediction of what is to come. Across the decades of the long nineteenth century, Cuban aspirations for a wholesome, harmonious national selfhood would collapse into Cuban desperation and decline. Early in the century, society is still likened to a delicate flower, with hope for proper nourishment, education, and improvement. Her disappearance at the end of the tale leaves open an (albeit tiny) escape valve for the mulata and her menaced society. Yet battling this sense of meliorism is its sad counterpoint. Already present in this version is a persistent negativity regarding her future. Already apparent is Cuban society’s lack of agency perceived by a community whose chances for self-determination are being actively thwarted. Threatened on all sides, liberal Cuba will fight to maintain her autonomy from competing white seducers to the north and to the east.<sup>26</sup> Like the delicate plant caught in a busy thoroughfare, she cannot survive the toxins impregnating her environment.

In this still early part of the century, Villaverde’s sense of meliorism leads him to struggle against this underlying (and unfortunately foresighted) pessimism. Here, he calls for assuming collective responsibility for social problems. He chastises the “unnamed few” Cuban forefathers for allowing someone such as Cecilia to become “seduced” by a duplicitous gallant’s charms. Again expressing impossibility in the past subjunctive, he laments her lack of guidance:

Hubiese tenido quien dirigiera su cabeza, y ella hubiera encontrado en sí misma trabas que oponer los arranques violentos de su corazón. Hubiese tenido a la vista más ejemplos

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<sup>25</sup> Villaverde includes this passage in the definitive version of the novel.

<sup>26</sup> The United States and Spain.

de moralidad y menos escenas populares, más sujeción y menos holganza, y no le hubieran despertado tan temprano sus arrebatadas pasiones (“CV” 203).

It is probably too late to redirect the fate of this particular individual. But the emphasis in this passage is on “sujeción,” “trabas,” impediments, and restrictions (203). Villaverde indicates that had Cecilia encountered these limits on her freedom, she would have emerged intact. Society is in a similarly desperate state. However, through these rhetorical examples he implies that its ills can still be remedied, perhaps by a narrative lesson for Creole readers on myopic desire for short-term pleasures, romantic or otherwise. A didactician like Saco, Villaverde calls for an increase in productive activities, a decrease in “popular” pastimes and the pursuit of self-indulgent pleasure, and a communal training of the mind to think dispassionately about the future. Civic leaders must show by example, just as he is attempting to do in this *cuento*.

### **The *Cecilia Valdés* of the Imprenta Literaria de Lino Valdés (1839)**

The second version of *Cecilia Valdés*, written at Villaverde’s friend Manuel de Portillo’s request, is relatively unknown because it has been subsumed under the final 1882 edition. Only a handful of copies exist in North American libraries. In Volume One of the 1839 novel, Cecilia is once again the victim of myriad pernicious influences—her lover Leonardo, her mulata friend Nemesia, as well as the negligence (“descuido”) of her “irascible”<sup>27</sup> grandmother (*Cecilia Valdés* [1839] 36).<sup>28</sup> This time, the city plays an increasingly important role as the fetid environment in which dangerous activities take place. Portillo had requested an account of the city’s *feria del Ángel*. Not only does Cecilia’s birth coincide with the arrival of the *feria*, but a significant portion of this novel takes place there (Farinas 168).<sup>29</sup> Once again, the street wields immense control in the formation of an individual character. It is the setting in which desire for misbehavior and miscegenation begins. Racial hybridity does indicate a social and moral disadvantage vis à vis the white classes, but again it is not a primary theme of this version. In addition, while the state of *mulatez* does signify a delay in that population’s moral development, it is by no means a static condition. Rather, racial purity and moral enlightenment are available to those who submit to a communal project of moral hygiene (what Lucila Farinas calls “educación moral” 161). As we will see, some are more open to such *ilustración* than others.

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about this version of the novel, so this section will only hazard a set of speculations. While only one volume of this text has been published, Villaverde presumably meant to finish the novel in the late 1840s. As proof of his endeavor, one can find nearly five chapters of an unfinished second volume—dated from February to September of 1841—in Havana’s Biblioteca Nacional. In addition, the outline for a sixth chapter, dated November 1845, appears in the same manuscript. It seems that Villaverde was indeed planning to eventually publish the early novel in its entirety, but more overt political engagements distracted him.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it is impossible to know how this version would have ended. We can reasonably presume that the short tale of *La Siempreviva*, ending in Cecilia’s

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<sup>27</sup> Coincidentally or not, *irascible* is a synonym for *cólerico*, choleric.

<sup>28</sup> For clarity’s sake, I will refer to this second version of *Cecilia Valdés* by its year of publication, 1839.

<sup>29</sup> In addition, of the two possible sets of circumstances surrounding Cecilia’s birth suggested in the short story, the first coincides with the *feria del Ángel*.

<sup>30</sup> In the 1840s Villaverde became active with Narciso López’s Cuban separatist group. By his own admission, he stopped publishing stories in mid-1848 when he was arrested for his political activism. He spent five months in jail, whence he escaped in April 1849, fleeing to the US. He only returned to Havana once more, in 1858. The rest of his life was spent as a militant separatist in New York. See Villaverde’s introduction to Ivan Schulman’s 1981 Biblioteca Ayacucho edition of the 1882 version of *Cecilia Valdés*, Imeldo Álvarez García’s introduction to the 1981 Letras Cubanas edition, and Doris Sommer’s chapter and notes, “Who Can Tell?” in her 1999 book *Proceed with Caution*.

disappearance, was meant to be an outline of the longer 1839 novel. However, due to its unfinished nature, the novel can appear more inconclusive or open-ended than Villaverde perhaps meant it to be. In any case, this version, a product of the first half of the century, reflects aspects of the social meliorism still present in Cuba at the time, whereas the definitive version mirrors the more clearly pessimistic narrative of national degeneracy as embodied in the mulata.

The first one-and-a-half chapters of the 1839 novel are virtually identical to those of the short story. Written in the form of an autobiography, they speculate about Cecilia's illicit origins, introduce her grandmother, and depict her as a young child wandering the streets. Next, the narrator makes his task as a *costumbrista* realist explicit. He plans to enlighten "toda clase de lectores, sobre cosas... que no están al alcance de la generalidad, o al menos, al de aquellos que no han puesto un estudio particular al examen de las costumbres del pueblo bajo en nuestra tierra" (*CV* [1839] 52). Here, the legitimate members of "our land" (presumably his educated, well-off white readership) are contrasted with the masses of "others"—the racialized, undisciplined "lower" orders—whose voiceless bodies metaphorize the unmanageable section of the Cuban populace. Despite his publication success, his audience was restricted to a relatively elite Cuban readership.<sup>31</sup> Ostensibly, his critique will focus on the habits and customs of the lower classes, rather than the physiognomies of the people themselves. However, he will use the racially tainted individual—the product of a vagrant lower class—as a consolidator of social troubles. Methodically examining her character will help him articulate Cuba's ailments. Recalling *La Moda's* injunction, "Para conocer a la mujer..." Villaverde encourages his reader to assume his classist subject position—as a member of the elite of pure European descent—as he continues: "Para conocerlo [al pueblo bajo], como para describirlo, es necesario observarlo en todas sus faces... el curioso investigador [necesita] sacar a luz [las costumbres de] las capas secundarias del pueblo" (*CV* [1839] 52). He tasks himself with examining the lifestyles of the lower classes, exposing their dark details to the purified light of rational scrutiny. The most visible "faz" of the *pueblo bajo* is, of course, the young Cecilia.

From the beginning of this narrative, Cecilia (one year older in this version than in the last) is visibly disturbed by a particular ailment, perceptible to the narrator, which defines all women: "Había en su postura, en sus maneras, y en la expresión dudosa e inquieta de su fisonomía, alguna cosa que no le era peculiar" (*CV* [1839] 54). This widespread affliction is not primarily linked to any visible racialized or even class marking. In fact, it is an illness to which all women are equally susceptible: lovesickness. However, the commonality stops there; neither Cecilia nor her negligent grandmother exhibit the restraint necessary to stop her from going astray. Her "singularity" has more to do with "el estar perennemente azotando calles" and the "libertad y descuido en que vivía" than with any inborn traits, "bastard" lineage, or the weak state of her blood (*CV* [1839] 10, 12, 14, 47). Yet the description of "andariega muchacha" defines her, the hustling female, as deviant character type (46). The narrator's anxiety to distance himself—and his class—from her body comes across as a desire to control its movements. This desire is projected onto the female figure, expressed as her fault, her debility, and her lack.

The unregulated circulation of women's bodies beyond patriarchal control was of prime concern to men of Villaverde's class. This female *vagancia*, manifested by Cecilia's last name, Valdés, is arguably the main subject of the novel. Valdés, "the most controversial surname in Cuba" according to Luz Mena, symbolizes Cecilia's displacement as an abandoned child living outside of the symbolic order ("No Common Folk" 21). Many children with this last name fell under the suspicion of racial impurity. Without a father and without clearly identifiable white

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<sup>31</sup> See Ambrosio Fomet's chapter "Literatura y mercado en la Cuba colonial (1830-1860)" in his book *El libro en Cuba (siglos XVIII y XIX)*.

nuclear family, Cecilia is not easily subjected to paternal discipline. “Yo soy Valdés: yo no tengo padre” she says, as if perversely proud of the deliberate obscurity surrounding her birth (*CV* [1839] 9, 21).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, abandoned children were a growing problem in nineteenth century Havana. Girls were especially worrisome because of their eventual reproductive potential. Uncontained by the formal institutions of patriarchy, from domestic space to prison to convent, Cecilia poses a threat to the nascent Cuban society of normalization.

Unrestricted by private space, Cecilia roams (“pasa,” “corre”) the streets as a boy or a man would do (*CV* [1839] 19). This activity comprises both her allure and her danger. She is alluring to the narrator because, unlike the wearisome and static confinement defining most of the women of his own class,<sup>33</sup> Cecilia is at relative liberty to follow her whim. Her transgressions render her more intriguing and less predictable. She represents the power and freedom of the masculine world. And she is dangerous and frightening for the same reason. Cecilia crosses (“atravesar”) the borders of gender and class (*CV* [1839] 14). She blurs the sexual boundaries between women and men. She participates in the public space of the market: “Las calles de la ciudad, las plazas, las tabernas, los baratillos, las tiendas de ropas... fueron su escuela” (15). She threatens Cuba’s fragile social and economic hierarchies. And she does it all unknowingly: “sin caer en la cuenta de que su vida vagabunda y callejera, que a ella le parecía por otra parte muy natural, inspiraba sospechas y temores” (13-14).

Juan Gelpí, in his article on the final (1882) version of *Cecilia Valdés*, paints the narrator as an agoraphobic figure because he seems wary of large open spaces and crowds of people, insisting on the closed spaces of houses. “El temor de los espacios abiertos está muy presente en la representación de la calle;” “las calles de la Habana figuran como un espacio fundamentalmente peligroso;” “[s]on también un espacio asociado con las pasiones incontrolables,” he says (49). However, the narrator seems more worried for Cecilia—or her fate—than for himself. As an upper middle class white man, he is in control of public space. This is manifested by his ability to know where Cecilia is at (nearly) all times. However, his over-reliance on maps might also betray an insecurity or lack of control over his own narration: “Una tardecita, entre otras, pasaba Cecilia por cierta calle, de cuyo nombre *no nos acordamos* aunque está en el plano de esta ciudad, que *no tenemos a mano* ahora” (*CV* [1839] 19-20) (my emphasis). Perhaps the narrator is afraid that he will lose track of Cecilia and be unable to chart her activities, leaving him with even less control than he has already.

In this version more than the last, the narrator is determined to track Cecilia’s movements. Rather than particularly agoraphobic, he is gynaephobic and an extraordinarily compulsive private investigator. Everywhere that Cecilia goes, a pair of eyes follow her. These eyes are afraid to allow her to leave their sight, but they are also fearful of approaching too closely. Most of all, they are both desirous of, and disturbed by, her body’s erratic movements. “Es verdad que desde esa edad reparó que ciertos ojos, no del todo indiferentes para ella, la perseguían por todas partes. ¡La cuitada! Esos ojos, lo sabemos de buena tinta, la seguían desde que empezó a correr por las calles” (*CV* [1839] 19). These eyes, we suppose, belong to her “true” unnamed father. However, they could just as easily belong to the narrator himself. In either case, the eyes try and fail to rein in Cecilia’s movements, as if to impose a semblance of order onto an

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<sup>32</sup> While she should have received her mother’s surname, her unacknowledged father preferred to consign her to the foundling hospital for illegitimate or abandoned children, thereby granting her what Ann Twinam calls “the natal and racial ‘benefit of the doubt’ and thus opening up ‘dangerous potentials for upward social and racial mobility’” (“The Church” 164). See *Raising an Empire*, Ch.s 5-6, by Ondina E. González and Ann Twinam, respectively.

<sup>33</sup> By his mid-thirties, Villaverde could no longer be considered an upstanding member of the Euro-Creole middle class. However, in his twenties he had conformed outwardly to the expectations of his social group. For instance, he obtained a certificate of *limpieza de sangre* in order to matriculate at Colegio San Carlos for law school. See Álvarez Garcías’ *Acerca del Cirilio Villaverde*.

inherently chaotic world. Instead, they are drawn in to the action of her wanderings, becoming visually contaminated by the unwholesome activities in which she participates. In this way, the masculinized gaze represents both attraction and repulsion, desire and self-defense. But it cannot protect itself by contagion from the dangerous underclass of which Cecilia is a prime member.

In many ways, Cecilia is defined as having a constitutive weakness understood to be common to all females. For example, at fifteen, she is already as susceptible as any grown woman—of any color or class—to the fever of love. But what sets her apart is her absolute submission to the “impulses of passion” that control her. Desire “le brotaba en el pecho espontáneamente, a la manera que la luz en la mañana de los trópicos, . . . y la dominó a placer (CV [1839] 53). While romantic love may be an emotion to which all women fall prey, her excessive and uncontrolled passion could set the mulata apart from her more demure and restrained Euro-Creole rivals. Passion, a “tropicalized”<sup>34</sup> attribute, drives her impulsively to follow her most base instincts: “Bisoña todavía en las lides del amor, y guiada por el solo instinto, se lanzaba al campo sin previsiones de ningún género, desarmada y ciega,” as her name suggests (53).<sup>35</sup> Her ill-preparedness and lack of self-control stem from several sources, only one of which is her own impurity of blood. The other components, according to the narrator, include “juventud,” “hermosura,” “temperamento,” and the self-explanatory “condición de mujer” (155).<sup>36</sup> However, by far the most important factors in the mulata’s immoderate behavior originate from her inattentive upbringing and the “miserable” socio-racial class from which she springs.

### A Faulty Upbringing

Cecilia’s *mala crianza* contributes more to her physical and moral shortcomings than any other factor. The squalor in which she is forced to live, together with the pathetic neglect of her moral education, both drag her downwards (“la arrastra”) inevitably toward baseness, turpitude, and sin. Without the moral pillars necessary to edify a sound character, she tumbles backwards into the atavistic oblivion of a wild beast: “cae el cuerpo en la flojedad y en la indolencia del bruto” (CV [1839] 55). Cecilia, like her black foremothers, seems governed by animal instinct. She seems destined to live out the “miserable suerte” of her near-black<sup>37</sup> grandmother (38). However, despite the consistent denigration of the “escuálida y horrible” *abuela* Chepa (Josefa), the narrator demonstrates a considerable amount of patronizing pity for the sickly “condition” of the racialized poor (36). He does not exonerate Chepa; he simply deems her incapable of exhibiting the moral probity characteristic of the more educated classes. Intrinsic to his logic is a racialized hierarchy, a classist totem pole on which Chepa, who is about as close to slavery as a free person can get, ranks near the bottom. In effect, he blames the spineless constitution of the heterogeneous collectivity for the moral weakness of the individual.

Regarding the particular lack of authoritative vigilance over her granddaughter, the narrator remarks in the concerned language of a well-meaning *ilustrado*, “credibile es que *ña* Chepa no supiese el remedio del mal que aquejaba a su nieta; posible es también que no fuese su intención el curarla” (CV [1839] 55). He is condescendingly sympathetic to Chepa’s boundless

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<sup>34</sup> I am borrowing the adjective “tropicalized” from Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, who define *tropicalism* as “the system of ideological fictions with which the dominant (Anglo and European) cultures trope Latin American identities and cultures,” including but not limited to “representations of Latina subjectivity and its encoding as tropical, exotic, hyper-eroticized sexuality” (1, 10). Recall that Leocadio, with his “corazón de los trópicos,” is also a product of this ideology (“CV” 206).

<sup>35</sup> The name Cecilia, the blind one, comes from the Latin *caecus-a-um*, blind

<sup>36</sup> One could argue that her beauty is an effect of her racial ambiguity, but my point here is that essentialized race is not the primary factor in Villaverde’s evaluation.

<sup>37</sup> *Abuela* Chepa’s race is classified as *anchinada*, the product of a mulato/a and a negro/a (37).

shortcomings without entirely excusing her inadequacies. He leaves open a space for the reader to doubt her pure intentions for her granddaughter. At the same time, he positions himself as an ally of his bourgeois reader, for whom he deciphers and translates Chepa's parental failings: "no dejará de parecer extraño y hasta culpable su conducta, en la apariencia indiferente y descuidada" (54). As we remember, only the experienced observer can accurately interpret false appearances. For the narrator, the issue is not that she is fundamentally "indifferent" to her granddaughter's upbringing. Rather, Chepa's debilitating "condition" as an obsolete vestige of slave society prevents her from bequeathing any legacy of evolution or modernity to Cecilia. Her conduct, a visible result of her socio-racial class, is passed on—albeit in a weaker form—to subsequent generations. Whether or not it eventually dies out, the pernicious half-life of disease is still alive in Cecilia. In effect, Chepa's status as a pre-modern outsider prevents her from initiating her granddaughter into urban middle class life. Because Cecilia's ability to prosper is contingent primarily upon the examples she internalizes, she must look outside the home for behavioral models. Unfortunately, she is unable to see that not all members of the Euro-Creole classes demonstrate equal quantities of moral soundness.

Tragically, Villaverde informs us, not all individuals evolve at comparable rates. Just as women may be atavistically mired in childlike dependency all of their lives, the cultural evolution of the lower classes occurs slowly, if at all. This evaluation of the great mass of the social body can be read as pessimistically despondent. However, in Villaverde's view, not every individual's behavior corresponds to her socio-racial class. Just as an individual like Leocadio/Leonardo is incapable of internalizing the *ilustración* of his Euro-Creole milieu, the trickle-down effect of modernization does permit the poorer (Afro-Creole) layers of society to receive some of the leftovers of modern progress. Therefore the plight of Cecilia's caste or *capa* is not a hopeless struggle, but simply a steep and arduous one:

La educación, y la cultura, que tan rápidos progresos hacen en las altas clases sociales, no morigeran, ni imprimen el mismo movimiento en las capas secundarias del pueblo, sino después de muchos años, pues la reciben por tasa y media; de suerte que las ideas, los usos, las costumbres, cuando en éstas no se quedan estacionarias, adelantan muy poco (CV [1839] 52).

Here Villaverde implies that although extra effort will have to be summoned to overcome the initial disadvantages of race and class, it is indeed possible to "improve" *el pueblo bajo*. In this case, however, a plethora of factors have conspired to create a situation formidable to surmount.

### **The Feria: In the Midst of the Madding Crowd**

A second, more fundamental component of Cecilia's *mala crianza* is her constant access to the street. Much of the action in this version of the novel unfolds in and around the *feria del Ángel*, considered one of the most populist and socially "inferior" of the quasi-religious festivals (Chateloin 37). For Bakhtin, carnival historically corresponds to folk culture or to the euphemistically named "lower" strata of society (*Rabelais* 20). From its origins in the "premodern" pre-Christian era, carnival displaces or inverts established social hierarchies. It also provides an opportunity for bodies normally yoked to labor activities to mingle, relax, and experience unfettered pleasure. In Cuba, various traditions (African, European, indigenous) converged to form an all-consuming cross-class celebration known as carnival (Bettelheim 68). The Euro-Creole bourgeoisie clearly enjoyed the festivities as much as did their poorer

neighbors. By the nineteenth century, carnival had become a large annual (pre-Lenten) public celebration popular among all classes throughout the island. Perhaps due to its status as a slave-holding Spanish colony, carnival in Cuba provided the chance for the carnivalesque blurring (if not wholehearted inversion) not just of class, race, and gender, and of urban and rural populations. Within the framework of carnival, much of the otherwise abnormalized activity—public drunkenness, horse racing, ridicule of public figures—was acceptable. While the colonial authorities generally tolerated carnival, the annual festivities were occasionally cancelled due to what the authorities deemed “moral and physical damage” to the public body, “indecen[cies],” “fear of disorder” and “excesses” of all kinds (Pérez, N. 30, 34). Thus, any reference to carnival signifies the disruption and chaos caused by such social and racial mixing.

First, Cecilia is goaded out of her house into the street by Nemesia, the mulata *parda* whom even the inattentive Chepa denounces as particularly “andrajosa, callejera y mal criada” (CV [1839] 43). The dark-skinned Nemesia represents the actively hostile “legión de pasiones que gastan el corazón,” an army of uncontrolled feelings—associated with the lower, darker classes—that overpower the unlucky Cecilia (16). Second, the *feria* is the space where Cecilia, through her ears and mouth, internalizes the “desorden” of the chaotic city (72)<sup>38</sup>. Last, the street facilitates her unsanctioned encounters with Leonardo, with whom it is now clear that she maintains “ilícitos lazos” (179). However, despite her increasing corruption, Cecilia maintains pure intentions and “buena voluntad.” For instance, unlike her counterpart Nemesia, she is capable of reasoning for herself, though the thoughts that Nemesia plants in her head increasingly pull her downward toward vileness and depravity.

In Greek mythology, Nemesis is the goddess of retributive justice or vengeance. Her namesake, a source of harm or ruin, takes great pleasure in stirring up the flames of Cecilia’s love-soaked jealousy of Leonardo’s other favorites. According to an ideology that glorified *blanqueamiento* and condoned socio-racial climbing, it would seem logical that the envy of the darker-skinned woman would drive her to attempt to topple her female rival. Cecilia, blind as usual to the truth, is unaware of Nemesia’s cunning wiles. Just as the narrator points out “los ojos demasiado lince de su amiga,” he affirms that Cecilia’s transparent emotions could be read even by the “más torpe fisonomista” (CV [1839] 66). Nemesia’s ability to discern her rival’s anxious mental state equates her with the masculinized observer, and like him she is far from a neutral onlooker. Instead, she becomes the vehicle that transports Cecilia into the polluted urban world of corruption: “la sacó de su casa para meterla en el bullicio de la feria” (149).

The *feria*, according to the Spanish colonial governor Tacón (1834-38), was a disorderly and dangerous custom for a population in need of increased regulation and surveillance. The *feria* encouraged raucous gambling, rowdy drinking, compulsive lottery playing and other debaucherous and supposedly harmful activities. Tacón disapproved of these transgressive “diversiones estrepitosas” because it was there that “se encontraba el germen de la disipación y de todo género de excesos” (Tacón 76, Chateloin 38). The extravagant *feria* was a form of pathogen that strayed—like vagrancy itself—from the lower orders to the entire population, attracting all classes of people. The colonial government attempted to “eradicate” these lawless celebrations from the city with moderate success (Chateloin 37). For Tacón, the deadliest aspect of the *feria* was that it incited a range of unsanctioned public behavior, not only in the marginalized demographic considered predisposed to intemperance, but in the city as a whole. “La frecuencia de estas ferias,” he complained in 1838, “excitaba por cierto una idea poco

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<sup>38</sup> In the 1882 version of the book, the mouth and lips are a primary conductor of contamination: “bebió a torrentes las aguas emponzoñadas del vicio” (Cecilia Valdés 75).

conforme a las leyes y pragmáticas, y mal avenida con el orden público” (Chateloin 38). In other words, participation in the *feria* was a pernicious custom that became cemented into the public’s impressionable character through force of habit.

Earlier in the decade, Saco had been one of the first to publicly voice his concern about the deleterious influence of the *feria* on the entire social body. He agreed that the *germen* of the *mal* began among the lower classes, but he was unconvinced of its effect on the bourgeoisie or the titled gentry. For Saco, those especially prone to vice and sin due to individual character flaws were the most likely to suffer from the excesses of the festivities.<sup>39</sup> Though he doubted whether the elevated classes would become infected by lawlessness and immorality, he worried about the general impact of unrestrained passion on the public body as a whole. In the early 1830s he asks rhetorically,

No seré yo tan injusto ni tan osado, que considere a todo el pueblo como cómplice de estos excesos; pero ¿habrá quien pueda negar, que las festividades son los días en que muchos se dan al juego y a la embriaguez, al torpe amor y a otras licencias que la moral y las leyes condenan? ¿No son ellas, los días en que jornaleros y artesanos dejan sus tareas, no para ir al templo, sino... para sacrificar en una hora todo el fruto de la semana, envolver a sus familias en el dolor y la miseria, y corromper con su ejemplo a las demás clases laboriosas? (*Memoria* 54-5).

It was Saco himself who complained that the *gente de color* held a monopoly on the manual arts in Cuba (*Memoria* 41). One suspects that the demographic of “jornaleros y artesanos” in this passage is a euphemism for racialized “others.” Saco’s scapegoat is the class of free black and mulato Habanese who drag down (“arrastran”) the productive workers into a life of vagrancy, idleness and moral turpitude (39). When he speaks of his remedy—a collective purification process, an erasure of the widespread “mancha” that this member of the public body leaves in its wake—the racial connotations are equally transparent (55). He does not aspire to the moral uplift of the cowering masses, few of whom are capable of the “ilustración” (ennobling instruction and enlightened civilization) that he proposes (39). However, he does hope to stem off the infection of passion, which, he laments, has become a generalized social infirmity. Overall, his assessment maintains a melioristic tone: while all working classes are susceptible to the germ of public dissipation, only the most obdurate, racialized “ociosos encubiertos”—discernable to a refined scientific eye such as his—are actually incapable of reform (37).

Villaverde’s commentaries reflect a similar frustration with the stubborn intemperance of the lower classes. However, the racial inflection of his criticism is more pronounced. Rather than obliquely referring to certain racial groups through an attack on the profligate or debaucherous customs associated with them, his assault is direct. For Villaverde, not only do the inhabitants of the poorer barrios carry genetic gambling and drinking addictions in their blood. The lowest, darkest classes are visibly evil (they are black). Their inner “ambición y codicia” simply erupts at the surface during the “ferias... incitativas” (*CV* [1839] 75). It is crucial to note that Cecilia, while somewhat racialized, is not a member of the very poorest of classes; thus she escapes from this set of characterizations. As even the most clueless country bumpkin observes, these sinners “tienen el diablo dentro del cuerpo según el furor de que están animados” (104). Rather than their race per se, it is their *furor* and *animación* that define them as wicked.

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<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, these are the same groups of people who were considered especially prone to cholera. See Ch. 1.

However, the racialized deviance inherent in these figures is impossible to disguise. The *feria*, instead of merely arousing the passions of an impressionable population, has enticed the most spurious of inveiglers to venture forth out of the city's invisible woodwork. In this confusion of boundaries and disorder of classes, not only is it more difficult than usual to distinguish one race of person from another, but it is virtually impossible to retain a distinct sense of direction or purpose. An individual becomes enveloped in the corrupt miasma of bodies. The more fully he enters the fray, the more disoriented he becomes:

Acontece en una feria, lo que en un baile de máscaras... el deseo vehemente de buscar un objeto, entre muchos, donde no aparecen nunca limpios y enteros sus contornos, hace que nos quedemos a oscuras, atormentados, con una idea muy vaga, vaporosa, que ni tiene forma, ni esencia de lo que en realidad es. Dícese que en los países setentrionales, es donde se encuentran las más raras figuras humanas: en ninguna parte del mundo hay caras, cuerpos y vestidos tan asquerosos y desformes, como los de nuestro pueblo bajo, y eso que estamos al mediodía. Colocados de noche al través de las rojizas luces que se encienden en una feria, se verá que no necesitan de careta para espantar: tan horribles son (CV [1839] 104-5).

In Villaverde's estimation, the excesses of the *feria* highlight the natural repugnance of the racialized poor. But more than that, they confuse the lower (ie: black) with the upper (ie: white[r]) classes. For him, the most disturbing aspect of carnival is that it confuses the distinctions between the marred bodies of the *pueblo bajo* and the more normalized bodies of the bourgeoisie. The frightening inner essence of the barbaric populace becomes suddenly more daring. Its effect on what Saco calls the "inocente puericia" would not be so alarming were these masses to remain physically segregated from the "cultured" classes in separate, distinct neighborhoods (*Memoria* 45). In fact, what produces the most anxiety in the *feria* is the excessive mingling of classes and races into an utterly chaotic amalgam impossible to narratively control. In this passage, Villaverde reveals what will become a massive preoccupation in his later novel: namely, an almost paranoid obsession with interracial mixing.

On festival day, however, the narrator is alternately fascinated and horrified that "se reúne y se confunde tanta gente" (CV [1839] 138). He might indeed, as William Luis asserts, feel claustrophobic as the people "se cruzaban en todas direcciones," but he is magnetically drawn to "una plaza pública hirviendo en hombres de todas condiciones y especies" (74). His attraction to crowds, which Walter Benjamin calls the subject most proper to nineteenth century literature, is reminiscent of a later era's Zola (Rennie 396). Carnival is the dangerously thrilling atmosphere into which all visitors, from the bronzed and citified Cecilia to her pure white rural counterpart Isabel, are thrown. A human "river" of unhygienic bodies chokes the city streets in a massive flood. The narrator anxiously describes the scene before him as

una bulla, una algazara, una agitación y movimiento incesante... un pueblo [como el nuestro!] entero entregado de hoz y de coz á los transportes de la alegría, á las instigaciones de la codicia, y de los afectos que más dominan el corazón del hombre (CV [1839] 103).

Although he recognizes himself as a member of the population, the narrator attempts "con tímido pincel" to maintain a safe and condescending distance from the crowded throngs (85). While this

*pueblo* is an amorphous “río” of noisy but depersonalized bodies, the narrator struggles to preserve his integrity as an articulate voyeur (100). Hygienically cordoned off from the pulsating mass, he tentatively traces the crowd’s aimless lurching movements. At the same time, he clearly takes pleasure in his descriptions: “es preciso que entiendan nuestros lectores que procuramos describirles en estos toscos renglones” (73). It seems as though he is attracted to the roughness of the carnival atmosphere. He laments the loss of the festival’s seductively naughty character: “[que] hayan perdido la memoria de lo que fueron” (73).

If the city incarnates the excessive and frightening “roce de las gentes,” the *feria* embodies the dissonant but exciting friction produced by so much somatic crossing and confusion (*CV* [1839] 131, 72). In fact, it is this blending of race and class that literally brought forth the hybrid Cecilia into the world. The narrator is far from unequivocal in his dread of the racial interactions that the *feria* enables. Sometimes he seems claustrophobic, eager to escape from the pinching and bruising of so many bodies; at other times he delights in seeing “una mano blanca, otra cobriza y otra negra estrechándose familiarmente” (75, 103). At moments he appears almost laudatory in his evaluation of the interracial amity spontaneously promoted by the cheerful atmosphere of the *feria*. On these occasions, united by the common pursuit of (not unwholesome) pleasure, the Cuban public body becomes a single organic entity, “rebotando en una alegría tan pura, que parece que animada de un solo deseo, el de solazarse, no tenía mas que un alma para sentir y un corazón para gozar” (72). The innocent gaiety of populist exuberance has an inoffensive (even pure!) quality. Far from being a “cabeza científica a lo Descartes o Condillac, . . . que traza límites y se adueña del espacio,” the narrator cannot stop himself from describing the chaotic mishmash, the rapidly boiling pot, of Cuban people (Álvarez García 25).

In the last several paragraphs, I have highlighted a narrator who, while he strives to be neutral, comes across to the reader as anything but a distanced observer. Just like Cecilia, he is swept up in the passions ignited by the *feria*. Titillated, anxious, horrified, and above all, seduced, the narrator very nearly becomes what he purports to critique and despise. Here, the myth of the disinterested *costumbrista* observer who has learned to “usar los ojos para ver, . . . para conocer, para ser” completely unravels (Álvarez García 25). If one of the goals of the novel is to address the problem of Cuban subjectivity, then it turns out that the agent of this investigation is also investigating himself. Instead of reiterating the “scientific” dichotomies of male/female and observer/observed, the boundaries between Self and Other being to collapse. It is not only his eyes that follow Cecilia’s movements, but his body as well. There is no escape from the contagious desire that this narrative ignites.

Soon the narrative order is recovered and the narrator reasserts his authority over the population by introducing an enemy. In stark contrast to the childlike public body innocently enjoying a salubrious activity, Villaverde introduces a vicious antagonist onto the scene. A micromanaging and authoritarian government, “con una providencia asaz severa,” has callously halted many of the harmless diversions popular at these events. Villaverde’s cautiously critical remarks allow him to equate colonial power with blatant cultural destruction, and *costumbrista* writing (or his fiction in particular) with noble cultural preservation. He laments, for example, that by the late 1830s the *feria* is only a shadow of what it once was in “aquellos felices tiempos” about which he is writing (*CV* [1839] 73, 77). Yet his sanitized nostalgia for the fading history of the bygone *feria* is frequently disrupted by the excessive emotional *goce* of so much somatic *roce*: his narrator’s vivid alarm at the contamination spread by the overzealous intermingling of so many grubby bodies.

It is clear that for the lower half of the population of which Cecilia is a product—for those in need of social discipline and *cuidado*—the influence of this chaotic environment is *nada edificante*. The “descuidado,” the “desorden,” the “oleadas de gentes...de todas condiciones y especias [que] se apeñuscaban y empujaban, aquel pequeño oceano que se mezclaban y confundían” (74-75, 77) is summed up as an “abreviado infierno” (76). It is apparent that the marginalized Cecilia, who lives next to the plaza where the crowds are passing, is morally polluted through physical proximity to such disorder. Reiterating the organic metaphor, the narrator compares her to a small plant tossed about mercilessly by a society heedless of her requirements for healthy growth. Like “algunas flores que cuelgan en las márgenes de los ríos,” whose disequilibrium is aggravated by the flowing body of water, “a ratos las lleva la corriente, a ratos se bamolean sobre su pétalo, ya lánguida se inclinaba al suelo, ya seguía el rumbo del Ángel... (56). Susceptible as she is to pernicious influences, the energy of the *feria* sweeps her up and entangles her in its mayhem.

The *feria* is also the vehicle that brings Cecilia into contact with the adult Leonardo (formerly Leocadio). She is contaminated through visual contact with the crowded street, where she searches fruitlessly for signs of her suitor (“sus ojos estaban fijos en un punto distante”) (56); through Nemesis’s nagging and prodding (“mi empeño es que vengas, que te conviene, y mucho”) (61), Cecilia ventures into the chaotic morass. The street reproduces its large-scale turmoil in miniature in “la alteración y el desorden que reinaba en todos sus ademanes” (65). The festive atmosphere of the *feria* propels her violently into the impulsive behavior that follows. However, despite an impetuous disposition shaped through contact with the streets, Cecilia struggles internally with her conscience. She never completely loses the moral compass that quietly but unfailingly guides her thoughts. For instance, even after a spate of jealousy causes her to spit in her rival Isabel’s face, Cecilia worries that she might have chosen the wrong girl as the object of her hatred. Even when she rashly decides to denounce Leonardo in public, she stops, hesitates, and ultimately rules against it. Although her volatility has launched her onto a treacherous path, the Cecilia of this early novel is not yet the more calcified, diabolical soul that she will eventually become.

### **Conclusion: Room for Improvement**

Imeldo Álvarez García declares that “En esta primera version todo es medio tono, boceto, anuncio, prefiguración, acopio de elementos, dimensiones, registros y detalles que servirán al autor de zócalo y marco para la refundición definitiva” (36). This is certainly true if one compares the two novels. However, this early version, if read alone, does not reach the depths of despair, decadence, and doom in which the later novel immerses itself. Cecilia may be on the road to incest and perdition, but her character is still un(der)formed. She is as easily influenced by positive character-building elements as by destructive, vicious ones. If the seeds of rot lie in this early novel, they are more embedded in the *vagancia* of life of the street than in the elements of the mulata’s innate character.

Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés* of 1839 cannot foresee the historical changes that would take place over the course of the century, nor can it anticipate the recasting of material and perspective that would inevitably occur after four decades—and years in exile—had elapsed. The abrupt inconclusiveness of this 1839 plot restricts any concrete assertion about its narrative similarity to the final version. The romance between Cecilia and Leonardo does hint at incest, but not in a definitive or pessimistic manner. Indeed, as Sybille Fischer notes in an introduction to the final version, inter-sibling romantic love was far from the worst of sins (xxi-iii). In

addition, Cecilia is but one of three rivals for Leonardo's affection, none of whom can be predicted to claim his full attention. The incomplete nature of this quadrangular intrigue challenges any suggestion of Villaverde's early social pessimism. Her exaggerated youth, the extreme malleability of Cecilia's character, and the scantiness of commentary about her impure blood, together belie any claims to Villaverde's supposed racially-tinged fatalism in 1839. However, one could also argue that the addition of a few years of life experience will ossify any wayward disposition. If one looks carefully, all of the deviant elements of the 1882 protagonist are present, albeit in chrysaline form, in this early version.

While it is true that Villaverde reworked aspects of the early novel in compiling the final version, the definitive Cecilia Valdés is the product of a different era. In contrast, the *boceto* of 1839 reveals a protagonist who manifests the potential to grow and flourish in a budding pluri-racial national configuration. She may be stubbornly slow to internalize the *ilustración* so stressed by men like Saco and Tacón, but this is more an effect of her "miserable" social condition than of an innate racialized atavism. The suggestion that urban pollution stems from a miasmatic environment and not from the mulata body itself hints that the racialized female is not yet a source of contagion, but rather, one of its unfortunate victims. If she does harbor the germ of her society's future decay, the disease has not yet gone "viral." It is contained within a few isolated incidents of immoderate behavior, and captured in a bittersweet *costumbrista* portrait of a bygone tradition. The germ has not yet descended into a generalized *mundo enfermo* of late-century insanity and unrestrained passion.

## Epilogue

This dissertation takes as its inspiration and point of departure *Cecilia Valdés*,<sup>1</sup> “the most important novel written in nineteenth century Cuba,” as William Luis rightly claims (*Literary Bondage* 100). Sibylle Fischer goes further to call it “without equal in nineteenth century Spanish American literature” (*Cecilia* xi). Since without doubt “*Cecilia Valdés* is the Cuban nation,” to write about *Cecilia* is inevitably to write about Cuba (Leante 25). But who is to say what the Cuban nation *is*? Such an artificial construct as the imagined community of the “nation” differs greatly over time and across space. I wanted to focus less on Cuban (trans)national culture as seen from New York City, where the 1882 version of *Cecilia Valdés* was published, and more on life in Havana at the beginning of the century, where the story (set from 1812 to 1830) originated.<sup>2</sup> And in order to write about the evolution of the entire novel, and not limit my investigations to the best-known final 1882 version—as the vast majority of critics have done—I had to begin at the beginning. So I set out investigating the literary boom of 1830s Havana that helped birth the iconic *Cecilia*.

Of course, early century Cuba is a vastly different island from the one that the Villaverde nostalgically recollects, from the distance of nearly forty years of time and space in exile in New York, in the 1880s. Cuba in 1830 is a primarily agricultural, slave-holding plantation society; it is an eclectic mix of loyal peninsular Spaniards and relatively politically progressive white creoles;<sup>3</sup> and it is an overseas province of Spain. Cuba by 1880 has undergone rapid industrialization, its first two unsuccessful wars for independence (1868-78 and 1879-80), and the disillusionment that comes with frustrated political hopes. The Cuban national narrative, as produced through the written word, has evolved from the minimal, site-specific circulation of literary manuscripts in early century Havana to the transcontinental publication of a multitude of Cuba-centered texts at late century. Rodrigo Lazo, for instance, describes “a long line of newspapers” owned and managed by Cubans in the United States: “From the first decades of the century to the outbreak of the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, Cuban exiles published more than seventy newspapers as well as dozens of pamphlets and books in Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans, and Tampa” (1-2). Cuba-focused publications may have garnered attention in the 1830s, but it was not until at least the 1840s and ’50s that Cuban-authored texts truly “proliferated” in the United States (2).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, “Cuba” was more the product of nationalistic sentiment projected from abroad than it was the fixed entity that proponents of independence wished it to be. Rather than write a top-down analysis of nation formation, I wanted the dissertation to be critically attentive to the local, the intimate, and the everyday concerns of the people who lived there at the dawn of this “Cubanification” process.<sup>5</sup> To write solely about “nation and narration” would be to lose much of the richness of social, racial, economic, and political tensions that colored daily life in colonial Havana. And while the final

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<sup>1</sup> By this I mean the 1882 novel.

<sup>2</sup> While critics of the 1882 *Cecilia Valdés* do trace the birth of the novel to the 1830s, they generally rush through their analyses of the early part of the century. See for example William Luis, Ivan Schulman, Doris Sommer, and Lorna Williams. Notable exceptions include Vera Kutzinski and Sibylle Fischer.

<sup>3</sup> Villaverde counts as one of the so-called “progressives” who push for severing ties with Spain. However, he hardly merits this distinction because he is concerned with Cuban political stability rather than abolition or legalized racial equality. Until mid-century, he favors Cuban annexation to the US because it is the best chance for Cuba to preserve its status as a white creole society. It is not until after the US Civil War that he changes his mind. See the critics listed in Note 1, above.

<sup>4</sup> Lazo: “Both during and after the filibustering fifties, the U.S.-based Cuban press engaged in debates on political developments in Cuba and functioned as a textual front in the formation of the nation” (3).

<sup>5</sup> Here I am principally interested in critiquing Doris Sommer’s “foundational fictions” narrative.

version of *Cecilia* is said to be a “mimetic historical representation” of the early nineteenth century, I wanted to separate fictional historical representation from actual historical experience.<sup>6</sup> Although it is impossible to know what the fiction writers of the 1830s boom were really thinking, I felt that their realist novels offered a relatively well-focused glimpse of “real” life—of the intricacies and anxieties of every day—at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This, therefore, was the methodology I set out for myself at the beginning of the dissertation project.

In addition to the century-long structural evolution mentioned above, Cuban society by 1882 had changed—I believe one can say indisputably—for the better. In what Rebecca Scott famously calls “the transition to free labor,” a gradual emancipation of slaves took place during the second half of the century.<sup>7</sup> Cubans of color had come a long way, from the barest margins of history to the center of the historical narrative. Their condition as slaves with zero narrative subjectivity had evolved into something else—perhaps just as racist but at least far less physically brutal, on the one hand, and far more socially visible, on the other.<sup>8</sup> The 1860s and ’70s, in particular, witnessed a reluctant and halting admission of black and mulato Cubans’ status as agential human subjects. Scott charts how, especially during the so-called Ten Years’ War (1868-78), nominally freed *libertos* increasingly and successfully “tr[ie]d to exercise their rights as free people” (51). In 1878, slaves who fought on either side of the war were freed in the Pacto de Zanjón. In 1880, wages for former slave “apprentices” (*patrocinados*) were introduced. By the mid-1880s, most of the Cubans still enslaved were purchasing their freedom, escaping the plantations, or negotiating freedom for their children. In Villaverde’s mind, all of this must have been a mixed blessing, representing the inevitable collapse of the plantation society and the privileges of whiteness that he had known as a young man while also granting increased dignity and equality for all of those born on Cuban soil.

Rodrigo Lazo argues that the 1882 version of *Cecilia Valdés* is an attempt to appropriate the memory of the past at a moment when Cuba’s future has never been more uncertain. He shows that Villaverde’s well-known evolution from annexationist to *independentista* is prompted by disappointment in the US commitment to Cuban socio-political interests and Cuban security. He claims that *Cecilia* “is an attempt to seize the nation at a moment when it appears to Villaverde that the military battle for the island has been lost to Spain” (4). For *Cecilia*’s writer, the impending abolition of legalized slavery is less important than the emancipation of Cuba from Spanish colonial rule. Cuban national sovereignty is more crucial than freedom for all of its inhabitants. While celebrating the increased liberty for all Cubans that had taken place gradually over his long lifetime, Villaverde simultaneously laments the decreased hopes for white creole rule. Most of all, he is nostalgic for the Cuba that existed prior to the Aponte Conspiracy of 1840, when black culture was allowed to subsist without overtly threatening white supremacy, and when colonial rule—at least for the white creole population—was not perceived to be as desperately militant or destructive.

For Villaverde to “seize” Cuba, he must find a suitable synecdoche. The textual existence of *Cecilia* can be possessed in a way that the elusive nation,<sup>9</sup> or even an elusive person, cannot. While *Cecilia* as a human subject can never be fully appropriated, as a fictional construction she satisfies a deep psychic need. The reader or writer can possess the material text in a way that one

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<sup>6</sup> For an example of how Villaverde attempted to stay faithful to historical fact, see Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, “Autenticidad de algunos negros y mulatos de Cecilia Valdés.”

<sup>7</sup> See *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*.

<sup>8</sup> I follow the lead of Foucault and Ann Stoler in thinking that discourses like racism never really fade, but rather mutate and become reincarnated as other manifestations of fear and hatred.

<sup>9</sup> See *Cuba, The Elusive Nation*; Damian J. Fernandez, Madeline Camara Betancourt, ed.

can never possess the nation. As Peter Brooks writes in *Realist Vision*, writing is a way of rendering the wide world a smaller, more manageable size. Perhaps this was what Villaverde was searching for.

Let's suppose, then, that making models of the things of the world is a function of our desire to play, and in playing to assert that we master the world, and therefore have a certain freedom from it [...] Play is a form of repetition of the world with this difference that the world has become manageable. We are in charge, we control its creatures and things (2).

Realist literature and art, thus, tries to reproduce reality and thus possess that reality through the playful creation of small-scale models in reality's image. It "claims to offer us a kind of reduction—*modèle réduit*—of the world, compacted into a volume that we know can provide, for the duration of our reading, the sense of a parallel reality that can almost supplant our own" (2). By looking into the past and recreating a society full of energy and potential, Villaverde can symbolically recreate what he has never been able to attain in real adult life: a sense of belonging to his imagined Cuba. He mirrors what Lazo calls "the narrator's desire to recuperate a place that was left behind" in the mists of time (19). I had hoped to trace Villaverde's evolution from annexationist to independentist, from novelist to militant activist and back again, through the chapters of my dissertation.

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Since my training is in literary criticism, I never intended that my focus would become a history of the nineteenth century. I turned to Adrián López-Denis, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, and many others to fill the gaps in my knowledge of Cuban history. I soon realized that my century-long arch of investigation was too ambitious a project to undertake in one dissertation, if even one lifetime. I had started out with a misunderstanding of the amount of ground a dissertation could cover. So eventually I settled for the fascinating but formative novels of the early nineteenth century, leaving the epic *Cecilia* for the book project. I relied on a few theories, most unproven, to propel me forward. They are: The seeds of the demonization of the mulata *femme fatale* were all present in the 1830s (if not centuries before; but that is beyond my point<sup>10</sup>). The pervasive racism (and sometimes even the full erasure of blacks from the narrative) was not quelled, but merely transformed, by the events of the century. The cholera epidemic served as one source of inspiration for the development of a medicalized vocabulary about social deviants—blacks foremost amongst them—that grew and proliferated over the course of time. The racist taxonomies of nineteenth century Europe were sculpted and sharpened by colonial contact. The gendered racism—and racist genderism—pervasive in the metropole would not have occurred to the degree that it did without the colonial experiments in the Caribbean.<sup>11</sup> Both sides of the Atlantic fed off each other in the proliferating discourses on social "improvement" or

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Lamore reminds us that "no hay que perder de vista que si la relación estereotipada entre la mujer y el diablo constituye un ingrediente antiguo de la mitología cristiana, no es menos cierto que la época moderna, al oponer dos tipos [ángel o demonio] muy distintos de mujer, adjudicará a aquélla de piel más o menos oscura la impronta demoníaca" (302). He also notes that, "Hacia el final del Siglo de las Luces, y al lado del discurso de Diderot, de Rousseau o de Bernardin de Saint Pierre sobre la "mujer natural" (mito o utopía)—que nos invita a imaginar la belleza de la mujer europea según las características universales del arquetipo de la mujer natural—, algunos autores proponen rasgos menos inocentes para la mujer exótica. Sólo que esta vez se trata de la negra" (298).

<sup>11</sup> Lamore writes that "los escritos dedicados al tema de la negra o la mulata de las islas están plagados [his word!] de motivos recurrentes como el ocio, la sensualidad, la frivolidad, la lascivia, la perversidad, incluso el demonismo..." (298).

“rehabilitation.” As the century wore on, modern Western societies became more and more hopeless—medical historian Sean Quinlan uses the word “pessimistic”—about the possibility for social restoration. The trajectory of *Cecilia Valdés*—in its three separate incarnations—traces the Cuban version this slow decline.

I have discussed many of these theories in the dissertation. The remainder I will attempt to address now. Jean Lamore, in his work on the mulata *mujer fatal* in nineteenth century Western medical and literary discourse, traces the *diabolicización* of Woman back to Genesis, when women were associated with Original Sin. While his research focuses on French and francophone representations, he also compares *Cecilia Valdés* to various mulata characters in French writing. He quotes Monique Schneider’s work on the definition of the feminine:

Le voisinage dans lequel le récit de la Genèse place Eve et Satan est éprouvé comme l’indice d’une parenté de nature, le Diable étant en effet défini par ses pouvoirs de séduction, de tentation, pouvoirs que les Pères de l’Église présenteront comme essentiellement féminins (Schneider 67).

Early nineteenth century French medical discourse, focused as it was on physiology, only served to explain and refine already pervasive racisms and genderisms. As early as 1775, cites Lamore, a biological determinism espoused by Pierre Roussel and company defined women as imprisoned by their sexuality.<sup>12</sup> “Encubiertos tras la pretensión cientifista de esta noción laten los antiguos prejuicios,” writes Lamore (312). When Europeans visited the Caribbean colonies, they found their preconceived beliefs about women’s natural animality confirmed by the sights of tropical laxity and languor, paired with a seemingly inexplicable lascivious passion for dancing (which they themselves supposedly did not share). All European attempts at explanation for these “perversities” led, of course, to the uterus, which in tropical women appeared to wield even greater influence over feminine character:

Les affections, dont la matrice est le siège, sont si communes et si violentes qu’elles ont accrédité parmi les femmes de couleur, l’étrange croyance que cet organe est un véritable animal qui a ses caprices, ses goûts et ses appétits, et qui se livre, dissent-elles, dans leur corps, à des mouvements divers, d’où naissent les maux dont elles sont affligées... (Moreau de Jonnés 31).

While this is a rhetorical statement meant to mock the exotic belief systems of *les femmes de couleur*, it is nonetheless faithful to its purpose of inciting primal fear of the womb/woman. And while doctors working in the Caribbean tended to ultimately blame all maladies on the climate, the severity of regular human afflictions was found to be doubled in women. A full century before Freud, it was a well-established trope that woman—and Tropical Woman to the n<sup>th</sup> degree—was incarcerated inside a frightening, thrilling, and incomprehensible superlative sexuality.

Thus the Caribbean experience aided rather than hindered European thinkers in the cementation of their age-old racial and gender prejudices. Medical breakthroughs later in the century, such as new theories on evolution and anthropology, would only serve to confirm these preformed beliefs. Darwinists would situate Woman at the dawn of human development, more similar in mental capacity to a small child than to an adult male. Anthropology, as we have seen

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<sup>12</sup> See Roussel’s *Système physique et moral de la femme*.

with Sander Gilman and Anne McClintock, would explain the Woman of Color as apelike and lascivious, driven only by “influencias naturales” and her “impulsos iterinos” (Lamore 312, 314). As Lamore says, modern times reinforced—and likely worsened—the mythic vision of Woman, and especially of colored Woman: “Las representaciones de la mujer del Nuevo Mundo que articulan los franceses [(and, I would add,) y los europeos en general] del siglo diecinueve son el producto de tradiciones antiguas marcadas por el peso de la herencia colonial” (306, -9).<sup>13</sup>

Of course, this parade of explanations about Woman speaks more to deep-seated male fear and desire than it does to any real flesh-and-blood woman herself. I suppose, in fact, that this has been the underlying theme of my project: to uncover the anxiety that operates behind the discursive power to define an Other. *Cecilia Valdés* encapsulates the impossibility of putting any closure to this angst-filled process. Defining her, or pinning down the putative Other, seems to be a matter of life and death for the ego-bound Self. Cecilia (for example) demands defining while at the same time escaping all definition. She is both “one of us” to the white author and inalterably alien, both beloved and reviled, both white and black. Cecilia is what Eugène Sue calls the *horrible encanto* par excellence: the woman of color who is both *sacerdotista de amor* and vampire, both *adorado* and *tormento*, both salvation and perdition (Lamore 304, 300, *CV* 332). She is her own constitutive antagonist, the largest paradox, the ultimate *pharmakon*.

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My original goal in Chapters Three and Four of the dissertation was to analyze the 1882 novel *Cecilia Valdés* in its entirety. By this time, the trope of Woman had undergone a metaphorical schism. On one side, there was the early Victorian angel in the house,<sup>14</sup> the sensitive and sensible white female who, idolized in romances and sentimental novels, may have been loveable (virtuous, pure, and noble) but was also an eminently boring figure. Then there was her racialized Other half, whom I call the demon in the street, the Africanized sorceress or witch who may be inferior, dark, dank, and dirty, but is also much more active, capable, confident, and strong. Together they form the *horrible encanto*; as products of exchange in the economy of sex, they are two sides of the same coin. In the 1882 version of *Cecilia*, Woman has been physically divided into two separate but to my mind equally weighty characters—the refined and gentle Isabel Ilincheta and the sensual, demonic Cecilia Valdés of the final novel. As Jean Lamore remarks, “[Isabel] ofrece un contraste marcado con respect de la mulata, Cecilia, a quien le sobra lo que le falta a Isabel” (305). Each woman is the other’s Cuban counterpoint, and the lesson imparted is that no woman, by herself, is whole.

Although they still have important roles to play, cholera and carnival at this point are no longer central concerns for the author or for me. Cholera was the inspiration for my configuration of the Cecilia character; carnival was the stage on which she represented herself. Rather than directly analyze these two tropes in the second half of the dissertation, I wanted to track how the language of disease and contagion—as well as the practice masking, passing, and disguise—insinuates itself into denigrated literary figures, and especially women, themselves. How effectively does the discourse of illness attach itself to these characters? How deliberately

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<sup>13</sup> These European beliefs were not invented in the colonies; rather, they found their echo there. As Lamore comments on the legend of *las mujeres devoradoras de hombres* in Colombia: “Asombra la semejanza de estos mitos con respecto de aquéllos que la imaginación europea ha elaborado con el correr de los siglos, proyectándolos particularmente sobre la mujer negra...[el hecho de la similitud entre estas figuraciones míticas] resulta verdaderamente enigmático (309).

<sup>14</sup> See the figure of Angélica in Chapter Three of this dissertation. The iconic figure of the angel in the house, of course, comes from Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem.

do they slough off disease, shed it like old skin, by passing as Others to themselves? To what extent are all characterizations equally fluid and flexible? I was fascinated by the degree to which Cecilia and other actors seemed (willfully or not) to subvert the writer's intent to portray them. How much of this Pygmalion effect can be attributed to the seductive magic of the reading/writing process—what Derrida calls “the going or leading astray”<sup>15</sup> of the written word—and how much of it is due to the fictional/historical characters themselves taking on a life of their own, is a question that fascinates me every time that I pick up a novel. I do sense in *Cecilia Valdés* a lively, mysterious resistance to the rigidity of literary inscription, especially on the part of the characters of color, the ex-slaves, their descendants, and everyone who has experienced, together with Juan Francisco Manzano, the decidedly mixed blessing of a forced and forceful entry into the world of semiotic representation.

By extension or by contrast, the white women characters in *Cecilia Valdés* seem to be constituted by the lack or absence of the attributes that define the blacks; namely, disease and contagion, subterfuge and passing. They may be disingenuous and deceptive, but they are also, to use Doris Sommer's characterization, virtual narrative “blanks” without much history or intrigue of their own (“Who Can Tell?” 210). To my thinking, the white women are sometimes more objectified even than the black women: They are made to be the objects upon which settlers build their colonial dreams, while women of color move and act in the world, disturbing and disrupting white privilege's best-laid plans. As Cecilia distracts her lover Leonardo from his betrothed, the prim Isabel “stays quiet and listens” (“Who can Tell?” 205). Another way of explaining this is to say that black women are, to use Judith Butler's phrase, white women's “constitutive outside.”<sup>16</sup> Without them, the latter would have nothing against which, and with which, to define themselves. Thus the ideal woman—like the manly and virtuous “virago” Isabel—is *lacking* in that which makes the black or mulata woman most interesting; namely, the sexy (feminine) aura of the illicit.<sup>17</sup> She may be the ideal raw material for a wife, defined by virginity and destined, like the Virgin Mary, to matrimony and maternity. But the (sexless) angel-woman is also characterized by an *absence* of color, physically, emotionally, and narratively.

It almost goes without saying that race in nineteenth century Cuba was more than a social construction. This was exemplified by the Spanish notion of *pureza de sangre*, an infamous ideal of the early modern era that was rehabilitated to distinguish between *color aparente* (racialized appearance) and *color legal* (genealogy or racial “essence”). Since neither inner essence nor secret genealogy is visible on the skin, outward appearance is a crucial indicator of race. The problem becomes that appearance is an unreliable witness to whiteness, as Cecilia's almost-*blancura* proves. For a woman to be deemed a pureblood, she must not only have light skin but also the legal designation of whiteness. In the early nineteenth century, this could only be granted by the Spanish crown through a *gracias al sacar* certificate, an official document that legally and socially wiped the grantee clean of any racial stain.<sup>18</sup> Anything less than this legal designation of blood purity would imply a genealogy of racial and social mixing. Cecilia dangerously and intriguingly exemplifies both types of bodily mixing.

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<sup>15</sup> See *Dissemination* 71.

<sup>16</sup> See Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, 192-94.

<sup>17</sup> Sommer generously characterizes the colorless Isabel as “elegant, correct, a fitting counterpart to independent and candid Cecilia...her womanly charm doesn't interfere with a markedly virile appeal” (188). Paradoxically, she is supposedly modeled after Villaverde's very independent (and independence-minded) wife, Emilia Casanova. Jean Lamore calls her “refinada y gentil, pero desprovista de sensualidad” (305). Villaverde himself describes her as possessing “los rasgos principales del tipo severo y modesto celtibero, a quien debía su origen” (*CV* 225).

<sup>18</sup> See María Elena Martínez on Spain and New Spain's *limpieza de sangre* history, as well as Ann Twinam, Ondina González, and Verena Martínez-Alier on *limpieza de sangre* in Cuba.

Speaking of mixing, the carnival dance or costume ball—still an important trope in the final version of the novel—is the site where somatic *mezclamiento* is practiced most artfully. “Passing,” the ability to appear as someone in an “other” social or racial class than oneself, is of primary importance. Whether its power is wielded on purpose or by accident, passing is a threat to socio-racial boundaries, physical-moral order, and the precarious yet tenacious status quo. Cecilia Valdés, for whom passing comes naturally, is the epitome of the trouble<sup>19</sup> that passing creates. For her, passing is not a verb but a noun: she does not consciously pass for white; rather, she is passing’s natural embodiment. Cecilia, the product of a mulata woman and white man, is not only passing’s *hija natural*, but also its propagator: She herself reproduces the never-ending quest for whiter whiteness, giving birth to an even-lighter daughter and thus continuing the cycle of gender and racial oppression. Cecilia is the devious and alluring sexual object of white men. Her half-sister Adela, for whom she is often mistaken, is an innocent and angelic colonial subject. The two look so much alike that they confuse even their closest relatives and admirers. Most fascinating, each girl harbors a bit of the other’s character in her. Cecilia allows herself, like the *ángel del hogar*, to be sexually objectified (i.e., desired) by Leonardo, who thinks of her as a sister (which, of course, she is). Adela, like the demon of the street, deviously disobeys her mother’s orders. Literally, the two girls are half sisters and *hermanas de leche*, sired by the same father and nursed by the same nanny.

Cecilia’s nanny, another intriguing *contrapunto* to the figure of Cecilia, merits a discussion in greater detail. The all-important Cuban mother figure, the martyr and nurse María de Regla—the goddess of the waters and the giver of all life—becomes a central focus of the second half of the book. If Cecilia is the dangerous, hybridized demon of the street, María is the pure, wholesome if primitive (*buena salvaje*) African mother-source. She is an idealized if atavistic mammalian<sup>20</sup> throwback to an “other,” more “natural” biological time, a time when (I picture Villaverde wistfully imagining) woman’s only instinct was to nurture.<sup>21</sup> María appears to be an anachronistic subject caught in a modernizing space-time, yet she is also, I want to argue, the most highly evolved character in the novel. *Ser* does not equal *parecer*; María is not what she at first seems. Her milk does indeed nourish—but also somatically mixes—three young girls together: the mulata Cecilia, the white Adela, and her own biological daughter, Dolores. Against her master’s explicit orders, María transgresses the senseless boundaries of wet nursing imposed by slavery, obeying instead the more generous, colorblind laws of instinctual maternity. Yet she is not “merely” maternal; rather, she shows that the maternal itself is also (naturally) slippery and subversive. A holy figure in both biblical and African mythology, María eschews the artificial laws of colonialism and slavery, instead respecting those of a higher moral order. While Villaverde, following the discourse of his era, is generally suspicious of black characters out of habit, he exalts María in a way unprecedented by his treatment of the other dark-skinned figures in the narrative. To paraphrase Butler, María is both “outside” the hegemonic order of whiteness and simultaneously “in” a state of hyperbolically pure nature (*Gender Trouble* 168).

María is both maternal purity incarnate and black rebellion embodied. She shows that each subject, each object, each category, contains *within itself* its own constitutive outside. Thus, María’s milk—her most natural, biological, seemingly apolitical bodily product—is the material that physically brings the warring races together, in infancy if not in adulthood. She unwittingly

<sup>19</sup> For Judith Butler, “trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it” (*Gender Trouble* xxvii).

<sup>20</sup> Before Linnaeus coined the term “mammalia” for the breastfeeding class of animals in 1758, “mam(m)a” was used to refer both to the nursing breast and to the mother. Of uncertain origin, it is probably a reduplication of the syllable /ma/, one of the earliest vocalizations that human beings make in infancy and the sound that babies often emit while breastfeeding. See the Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>21</sup> I am thinking here of Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other*, as well as Anne McClintock’s formulation of “anachronistic space.”

proves that the body—the troublesome matter purportedly “outside” politics—is inherently political and insatiably rebellious; that the nurse-mother—that nurturing creature presumably removed from the masculinized marketplace—is inherently economic; and that “raciality”—that natural color supposedly independent of the social sphere—is always (if not only) a social construction. In a way, María de Regla is the exception that proves the rule of all binaries: She is the source of all trouble, the instigator of all deviance, the mother of all mixing.

Female bodies of all types find themselves scrutinized by our author. While the female body is deemed pathological by default, some bodies are evidently more threatening than others. María, following nature’s mandate, is infinitely preferable to Cecilia, whose ambitions for herself and her offspring vastly overstep her proper place in society. While María quietly and unassumingly undermines her masters’ wishes, Cecilia flagrantly flouts social conventions. Both, as women, have the frightening and awe-inspiring power to create new life. I cannot help but think that this is what causes generation after generation, indeed century after century, of male authors to demonize us. Yet (to return to the book in question) Cecilia yields this power in a more immediately dangerous way. The main threat to white male hegemony in this novel is movement, passing, or the aspiration to better oneself through one’s offspring. Not only is María uninterested in trying to pass (although she “passes” her milk among three infants and three sets of races). She is also too obviously dark-skinned to represent much of a threat to white supremacy. In contrast, Cecilia, her deviant counterpart, relentlessly challenges the socio-racial order of things, constantly attempting to break and enter the gilded halls of white power. María seems selfless; Cecilia is clearly self-centered. Cecilia, as the devil in the street who refuses to be reined in, the shrew whose shrill voice will not be tamed or subdued, is condemned both by Cuban society and by her author from the beginning. She is the contagion that cholera has spawned. By education or by design, by nature or by nurture, she is the iconic *mujer fatal*, the “demonio exterminador,” the figure who delivers both *placer* and *perdición* in one blow (Lamore 304). In order for the novel to end, she must be removed from circulation. María, the novel’s only hope for a racially harmonious future, will never be heard. Villaverde seems to lament this fact only because he is focused on the far more worrisome threat of the near-white social ascension of the hybrid sort embodied by Cecilia and her daughter. Unfortunately for white privilege, his call of alarm comes too late. Cuba by 1882 is well on its way to becoming a truly multiracial society.

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