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Narrative Intervention and the Black Aesthetic in Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* and Martín Morúa Delgado's *Sofía*

Vanessa Nelsen

In nineteenth-century Cuba, a politically influential group of Creole intellectuals, writers and literary critics, headed by Domingo del Monte, sought to replace the ruling Peninsular hegemony by creating a national literary institution under which they could consolidate their power. These writers would take the image of colonial Cuba, as established in Peninsular art and literature, and reinvent it through strategic alteration as a national literature. Del Monte stressed the importance of developing a writing style conducive to the representation of an independent Cuba that differed from the idealized Peninsular image in which Cuba appeared as a colonizer's utopia or a docile territory that generated prosperity for the motherland. This image of a colonial Cuba was propagated in an art and literature that conspicuously omitted the presence of freed blacks on the island at a time when their presence had never been so statistically significant or politically troublesome for the colonial order.¹ In order to outshine Peninsular rule at its own power game, the del Monte writers adopted a *costumbrista* style of writing, but incorporated a feature previously excluded from these European texts and crucial to disturbing the colonial image: blackness. Because slave rebellions, a growing class of freed blacks, and emancipation movements already threatened colonial hegemony continent-wide, a literature that centered on blackness could destabilize the colonial government led by Capitán General Tacón, which represented the interests of large sugar plantations and slavers. Thus, white Creole writers consolidated their ranks and moved toward institutionality by asserting a proto-nationalist politics encapsulated by the vehicle of a strategically positioned blackness within their texts.

Blackness, then, becomes an identifying marker of Cuban national literature. As the central and key feature in these national texts, it also disguises the various political intentions of authors behind the suggestion of a common and ostensibly abolitionist concern for blackness. But because representing blackness *in and of itself* is not the motivating force behind their texts, but rather creates a textual accessory through which writers hoped to achieve their goal of asserting their own power, then blackness becomes an exclusionary inclusion, so to speak: strategically managed within, but alien to, the rest

of the narrative. That blackness should be relegated to the margins of narrative discourse as a foreign feature—an object of narrative, but never a subject—reflects Creole writers' true desire to alienate the black from their national narrative. The lack of integration between blackness as an aesthetic adornment and the larger narrative purpose of these texts ultimately undermines these Creole writers' *telos* of representing a unified national body by belying a black marginalization from that imagined nation. Thus, I argue that behind the aesthetic trope of blackness we do not encounter an easy appropriation of the black into a national discourse, but rather the Creole writers' silencing of the black voice, which results from these writers' reluctance to tolerate any threat to a national identity predicated on whiteness.

In constructing blackness, Domingo del Monte and his literary circle drew upon what it had witnessed in the formation of a national literature in Jamaica. There, Creoles wanting to assert themselves against the colonial apparatus formed an analogous literary institution led by Richard Madden.² This circle succeeded in wresting the category of Enlightened “civilization” away from the colonial order and realigning it with the black social element, which would now stand in subversive opposition to a colonialism defined as “barbaric” first and foremost because of its slave system, thus demonstrating the power of “civilized” blacks over the “barbarism” of European rule. The del Monte circle established its own literature on the foundations of this rhetorical maneuver, inverting the reigning conceptual hierarchy between blackness and colonial whiteness by positioning blackness at the center of their texts and marginalizing colonial, but not Creole, whiteness. In *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* (1990), William Luis suggests that, although this circle's texts centered on blackness, white Creole writers were concerned with their own political project and not with representing the black *per se* (27–30). They may have used blackness as an aesthetic tool to upset colonial power, but they were not interested in sacrificing their position of privilege; on the contrary, this power is what they sought to consolidate through literature. Indeed, a slave uprising or emancipation posed the same threat of destabilization to this emergent Creole group as it did to the Peninsular colonial government because the power of both was predicated on a racial hierarchy. Del Monte and his followers included blacks in their national portrait because they realized that their inclusion was key to breaking away from the colonial order. Thus, this literary inversion of blackness and whiteness accomplished neither more nor less than a political inversion between white Creoles and white Peninsulars, with the black nowhere to be found in this new paradigm of power. In the final analysis, then, this black-white inversion does not privilege the black, but only aligns white Creole writers with the structure of the colonial model itself. The conceptual inversion between colonizers and slaves did not serve so much to vindicate slaves as it did to catapult del Monte's group into the hegemonic position previously occupied by the colonizers. Like the colonial model, whose power relies on the existence of a subjugated class, the resulting Creole model of Cuba depends on the subjugation of the black population.

Because Creole power depended upon the potential of the black to disturb the Peninsular order, while at the same time consolidating its own power against that of the black social element, these writers must at once present the power of the black while simultaneously confining it. Hence Creole writers avail themselves of the tool of *costumbrista* literature, a genre that seeks hegemonic control of people, customs, and land through the vocabulary

of classifications and taxonomies. Previously, Spanish *costumbrista* and ‘realist’ literature had been employed by the colonizers to establish, organize, and maintain control of the colonies; “realism,” it should be clear, has more to do with the discourse of power than with material circumstance. Even so, the colonial insistence on textual whiteness proved to be its Achilles’ heel because of its patent incongruence with the increasingly apparent black presence as the slave population grew and nearby countries achieved independence. Since the capacity to control Cuba depended on a mastery of the organization of its people, as soon as one social element—namely, the blacks—escaped its reach, the need for order became recognizable and the task of ordering fell to those first to recognize the previous system’s flaw. Indeed, Creole *costumbristas* incorporated the black into their literature, thereby challenging the established colonial order by exposing what the Spanish had attempted to hide. They exaggerated the supposed horrors of colonialism, representing the nation in what they saw as a more “realistic” light that underscored a conceptual equivalency between Peninsular colonialism and slavery.

Creole writers faced the difficulty of incorporating abolitionist literature into their own emergent genre of Creole *costumbrismo*. While abolitionist literature sought to end slavery for a variety of reasons and thus tended to grant black slaves agency even if limited to a textual form, Creole *costumbrismo* purposefully wanted to control blackness in texts and social reality alike. In order for the white Creole writers’ project of nation-formation to succeed, the black had to be relegated to the margins of a Creole project so that he would not usurp white Creole agency in authoring the national narrative.

Initially, Creole *costumbrista* authors depended on character types—stereotypes complete with a profession, location, type of speech, and clothing—to assert control and order over the national subject. Placed strategically in order to engender in the reader a sense of cultural authenticity, character types function in *costumbrista* texts as artifacts in an exhibit of the nation designed by the Creole elite. *Costumbristas* frequently claimed that they produced these folkloric characters by observing them directly, a claim meant to bolster their authority over social “reality.” However, by and large, their character types allude to an already established cadre of characters within an extant body of anthropological and historiographical Creole writing dating back to the turn of the 18th century.³ Because specific character types such as *la Mulata*, a beautiful biracial female, *el Gallego*, a salesman or storeowner from Spain, and *el Níñigo*, a rebellious black difficult to assimilate, repeat in identical fashion throughout Creole historiography, the inclusion of such figures is purely self-referential from a Creole point of view. In other words, Creole *costumbrista* authors putatively intent on demonstrating social realism pulled characters not from reality, but from a historiographical discourse that they themselves had already created. Thus, in the very act of representing black characters, white Creole writers actually represent their own authorial image. That the panoply of character types is a testament to Creole control is perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Tipos y costumbres de la Isla de Cuba* (1882), a characterological compendium by renowned *costumbristas* that put the full range of character types on exhibit for use in constructing the national imaginary ideated by white Creole authors. Emphasizing power, this book represents the racial spectrum of society as a museum of the social order that is authored and controlled by white Creole elite.

The rules of engagement in the game of Creole power put a premium on realism because the adherence to realism or *costumbrista* technique was directly proportional to the effectiveness of the created image to disturb the colonial image by evincing a Creole mastery of “reality” superior to that of his Peninsular counterpart, and thus, the amount of Creole power that could be asserted. But Creole writers came up against the problem of their need to maintain control over the characters whose inclusion in their texts was intended to redound to their own power in the first place. Creole writers resorted to self-referential character types to contain the agency of the dark characters that they were representing, so the fact that many of the same character types circulated repetitively, in identical fashion, threw the “realism” of their representations into question, since this constructed nature of the “realistic” image was not masked. If race as represented by Creole *costumbrismo* was contingent upon pre-established character types, then it would suggest that *costumbristas* did not, in fact, record everyday scenes and local color as they saw them, but rather did so through the patently archival lens of Creole elitist knowledge of how *costumbrista* character types should appear, not how they did appear. Thus, *costumbristas* struggled to perfect an appearance of increasingly realistic portraits, and, to the catalogue of character types at their disposal, Creole writers added well-known historical figures to attest to their mastery of reality and, therefore, the nation.

In this hyperbolic quest to represent and maintain control over realism, *costumbristas* seek to approximate evermore what is perceived as true-life potentiality. Creole writers try to make character types leap off the page; the precision of their representations asserts control not only over their craft, but also over the real-life subjects behind these representations. Illustrating character types by means of race, occupation, attire, or environment was to freeze history and gather it up, thereby making it tangible and concrete. The inclusion of historical figures was an attempt to prove their mastery over the present moment; the final pass in their attempt to create a true-to-life social portrait was the manipulation of speech. The representation of speech was supposed to breathe life into the erstwhile two-dimensional dark character types and historical figures, endowing them with a life-like verisimilitude that affirmed the power of the Creole elite writer to capture reality on the page. Speech, therefore, became a central fixture of national representations, one more powerful than the mere citation of a character type or historical figure.

Appreciating character types, historical figures, and the manipulation of speech as central to *costumbrista* representation, Cirilo Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés* appears to be a quintessentially *costumbrista* work. Character types such as *el Médico del Campo*, *el Ñáñigo*, and *la Mulata de Rumbo* appear almost identically in *Cecilia Valdés* as they have in *Tipos y costumbres de la Isla de Cuba*, which was published in the same year as the third and final edition of the novel. The similarities between this text’s and Villaverde’s characters underscore the hypothesis that the supposedly realistic *costumbrista* descriptions were born of a lettered discourse already in circulation among Creole intellectuals. As Sybil Fischer has claimed in her English-translation edition to the text, it seems that Villaverde gave some of the historically well-known free persons of color “walk-on roles” (xvii). One much commented display of such character types and historical figures takes the form here of a “colored people’s dance,” and functions to demonstrate the cultural accuracy of Villaverde’s representations (though, as I will discuss later, this scene is also the locus of a

critical display of narrative power). Villaverde was also attentive to the representation of speech, and, in keeping with the *costumbristas*' tendency to claim eyewitness authority, Villaverde claimed that he copied the speech of certain characters while staying on his family's plantation. Although his critical following at that time praised his use of *bozal* and *congo* voices, and echoed his claim about their origin, his critics' readings of *Cecilia Valdés* take issue with the authenticity of Villaverde's representation of black speech, unwittingly calling attention to the motivation and anxiety behind its reproduction.

Imeldo Álvarez García, Esteban Rodríguez Herrera, and Raimundo Lazo conducted independently the first and most explicit studies of language in *Cecilia Valdés*. All three recognize that Villaverde made considerable efforts toward precision in rendering the speech of his characters, and coincide in stating that Villaverde attempted to match each character type to a particular form of speech that dovetailed with social status, work, and race.⁴ They also praise Villaverde's ability to capture diverse forms of speech. In devoting so much attention to the precision of speech, these critics reiterate the premium placed on the category of "reality" in adjudicating the power to write the nation, therefore signaling the locus of speech as a particularly charged site in the contest of that power. After praising Villaverde's accuracy in the representation of speech, however, these same readers curiously go on to contradict this original assertion by calling into question certain inaccuracies in his representation of black speech. Rodríguez Herrera averred, for example, that "siempre las imitaciones no fueron del todo correctas o felices, sobre todo tratándose del lenguaje de los negros bozales," yet went on to note that "Villaverde sabía distinguir el 'entoavía' o 'entuavía' de un bozal, del 'entodavía' ultracorrecto usado por ña Cepilla y Nemesia, para luego escribir 'todavía' por propia cuenta o en el lenguaje de Leonardo, doña Rosa u otra persona de preparación" (157–8). Rodríguez Herrera did an about-face to say that "Villaverde a veces falla al poner en boca de algunos esclavos palabras como 'Cruz,' 'dispués' y otras, en vez de 'Crú' y 'dispué' o 'dimpué', como se advierte en algunos pasajes" (158).⁵ Meanwhile, Lazo described what he viewed as the intentional deformation of lower-class language, which forces the reader to be conscious of local speech variations, yet says little about how Villaverde applied these forms of speech to marginal characters (267–8). What is critical to note is that these imputed "errors" in speech all revolve around instances of specifically black speech. Bearing this in mind, the critics underscore black orality as the category of *costumbrista* representation that was absolutely decisive, and also the most contested, in establishing the power of the Creole writer.

Even as it affirms the white Creole author's command over everyday life and legitimizes him as the rightful head of the nation, the inclusion of speech also poses the greatest threat to Creole narrative authority. The fundamental conflict produced by textual orality arises when the black voices marshaled to affirm white Creole power reach the point of being able to speak for themselves. To help illuminate this difficulty, I would like to posit two kinds of orality: one that pertains to carefully controlled character types and that serves to support white Creole definition of the nation by being stabilized and managed as perfectly self-contained objects in their exhibit. I will refer to this form of orality as "museum speech." The second type of orality is associated with round or dynamic characters that move beyond mere character types or what we might call "dynamic speech." This form of speech moves the plot and thus takes an active role in national

narration. In a bid for maximum “realism,” white Creole authors move into the terrain of this second kind of orality, giving voice to dark characters that goes beyond formulaic museum speech. At this juncture, the dynamic speech unhinges the dark characters from their museum casings, coming uncomfortably close to occupying the position of the narrator—the position of writing the nation. Thus, paradoxically, the white Creole’s anxiety to represent realism leads him to resort to speech—first museum speech and then dynamic speech—as the maximum tool in his aesthetic repertoire of creating a maximally “realistic” national portrait, but it is precisely this aesthetic strategy that destabilizes his written discourse and therefore his control over the nation. Indeed, such destabilization becomes apparent in the analysis of instances where black speech nears dynamic speech in *Cecilia Valdés*.

Cecilia Valdés

Read allegorically, *Cecilia Valdés* denounces the Peninsular rule that controls and contains Cuba because, by the end of the text, Cecilia—as the symbol of Cuba—is robbed of her offspring and incarcerated—a repetition of her mother’s experiences. Yet this reading of Cuba or Cecilia’s equivocal incarceration depends on the criminalization of the secondary character, José Dolores Pimienta. I argue that Villaverde, as a white Creole writer, denounces this Peninsular incarceration of the nation by authoring Cecilia’s imprisonment in a way that strategically criminalizes the dark skinned *mulato* in the process, and thus his critique of Peninsular rule paradoxically follows a colonial model. Just as Peninsulars excluded blacks from their idealized image of Cuba, the way in which the white Creole writer accomplishes the denunciation of the Peninsular in narrative terms positions and maintains the black characters at the margins of the white Creoles’ imagined nation that Cecilia represents. Although many read Cecilia as the incarnation of racial mixing, it is important to note that she embodies an imagined nation whose pronounced white features and ability to pass and coexist with whites seem more remarkable than her characterological definition as a *mulata*. In spite of the fact that her status as a black leads her to ill and unjust treatment, she looks identical to her half-sister Adela, who is the white daughter of Rosa and Cándido Gamboa.⁶ Thus, the text does not suggest a Creole concern for the lack of black agency within the inventory of Peninsular abuse of the nation as a whole. Because the combination of Rosa’s refusal to see past Cecilia’s black status—in spite of her white appearance—and José Dolores’s actions lead to her incarceration, Villaverde implies that not only Peninsulars, but also blacks, are to blame for what this Creole white nation suffers. This criminalization is one of the two key moments I will analyze, along with the movement from museum to dynamic speech. This second moment occurs earlier when black speech is silenced before it can reveal to Cecilia her true origins. The first moment renders the black as a constant threat to white power that must be contained, yet the second moment renders the black as a constant threat to the whiteness upon which that power is predicated. The combination of these two moments functions to assert white Creole power over the aesthetic of blackness, the very aesthetic that Creole authors used to legitimate themselves as the writers of the nation and as the denouncers of the nation’s incarceration by the Peninsular order.

It is from the very opening of the text that blackness is cast as a recurring fixed symbol or motif: on the one hand, invested with the power to alter the utopian vision of the island

established by the Peninsular colonizer's *costumbrismo*, and, on the other, consigned to being a mere object of Creole narrative power. In other words, white Creole writers bring blackness into the *costumbrista* text in order to destabilize colonial power and establish a Creole national literature. This aesthetic of blackness, in turn, draws attention to the fact that they assert a claim over Cuba by appropriating blackness. In positioning this blackness as no more nor less than a tool to counter Peninsular whiteness, yet never a part of their own Creole subjectivity, it paradoxically speaks only about their own Creole whiteness. As a motif, blackness is controlled, frozen, a fixed symbol that repeats throughout the text in a strictly denotative capacity. As such, blackness is not possessed of narrative dynamism or the capacity to become a *bona fide* theme; it is not allowed to reach the proportions of a conceptual center, and therefore there is no attribution of agency to those black voices. As we will see in the case of *Cecilia Valdés*, the white Creole writer controls this potentially disturbing quality by limiting blackness to the level of a detail or an adornment of the text, whose real theme is white Creole power.

As the text opens, a carriage arrives at the corner of Callejón de San Juan de Dios. The curtains, tied down by calfskins, conceal the passenger inside the car, thereby creating an air of mystery. Here, Villaverde notes that “parecía excusada la precaución [of tying down the curtains], por cuanto no había alma viviente en las calles, ni se divisaba otra luz que la de las estrellas” (15). Rather than present a realistic scene, the narrated moment becomes morbid and unexplainable. What strange place is this where, as if the total absence of people were not enough, persons further conceal their faces behind another veil? And, if Villaverde has said himself in his prologue to the novel that he sought after a realistic vision of society, why does he insist on obscuring the ambience of his text in this scene? Villaverde offers, in another part of the prologue, an explanation as to why he felt the need to add such gothic elements to this “realistic” text:

Me ha salido el cuadro tan sombrío y de carácter tan trágico que, Cubano como soy hasta la médula de los huesos y hombre de moralidad, siento una especie de temor o vergüenza presentarlo al público sin una palabra explicativa de disculpa. Harto se me alcanza que los extraños, dígame, las personas que no conozcan de cerca las costumbres ni la época de la historia de Cuba que he querido pintar, tal vez crean que escogí los colores más oscuros y sobrecargué de sombras el cuadro por el mero placer de causar efecto a la Rembrandt, o a la Gustavo Doré. Nada más distante de mi mente. Me precio de ser, antes que otra cosa, escritor realista, tomando esta palabra en el sentido artístico que se le da modernamente. (8–9)

Our author suggests that the darkness made explicit on the page, this lingering opacity in the island's air, existed in reality as perhaps its most fundamental yet virtually invisible feature, imperceptible to the untrained eye. But, from another perspective, it seems that, given his need to explain such dark features—an explanation that appears in his foreword to the text—Villaverde consciously established Cuba's black reality. Villaverde insists that “blackness” was a part of the social spectrum of his day and was apparent to Cuban natives well versed in local customs and traditions. Villaverde's apparent goal, as he suggests in the prologue, is to depict the full reality of local culture by including the problems attendant to the slave system and creating a true-to-life representation of

specific characters and scenes. But this does not explain why he resorts to an abstract and melodramatic portrayal of “blackness” which adds a high degree of symbolic charge to a putatively “realistic” portrait. Villaverde further complicates this matter by declaring:

Tampoco ha de achacarse a falta del autor si el cuadro no ilustra, no escarmienta, no enseña deleitando. Lo más que me ha sido dado hacer es abstenerme de toda pintura impúdica o grosera, falta en que era fácil incurrir, habida consideración a las condiciones, al carácter y a las pasiones de la mayoría de los actores de la novela; porque nunca he creído que el escritor público, en el afán de parecer fiel y exacto pintor de las costumbres, haya de olvidar que le merecen respeto la virtud y la modestia del lector [. . .]. (10)

Thus, the total reality of Cuban society at this time could not be reproduced explicitly in the drama because Villaverde preferred not to delve into the worst features of reality out of respect to the reader, these worst features being constituted by a looming darkness—a kind of grotesque threat—perceived by the white Creole writer as a fact of Cuban reality. Villaverde both presents us with a darkened, disturbing scene and suggests his portrayal is accurate because he views the obscured ambient of his day as “indecent or gross,” yet he wants to spare those of his social class their representation. This unnamed and “indecent” threat would seem to be none other than that perceived in the fact of real social blackness in growing numbers. Blackness as an aesthetic tool serves to signify this “grotesque” and threatening reality by serving as a vehicle for the projection of Creole fears and anxiety. Ultimately, theirs is not an image of blackness per se, but rather an image of the threat of blackness. This helps us to understand why the black characters that were most “realistic” by virtue of threatening to move beyond museum speech to dynamic speech were simultaneously invested with a highly problematic and threatening power that had to be controlled by the white Creole writer. Blackness as a captured aesthetic category, therefore, is not only a means of preventing it from ever developing into an authorial threat to the white Creole writer; it is also a means of referencing very real social fears in a way that, contrary to logical expectations, exaggerates the latent threat of those black characters only to quash it in affirmation of white Creole hegemony. Blackness serves a double purpose in representing “realism”: it affirms the Creole writer’s museum-like grip on all of Cuban society, but it also gives full representation to the Creole writer’s fears and anxieties about maintaining the status quo in racialized Cuban social hierarchy.

The way in which this black aesthetic appears in the text in order to cite blackness while at the same time attesting to the narrator’s control of the same is exemplified in two scenes where darker character types appear and begin to speak, but are interrupted abruptly by the narrator’s intervention. Comparable to the carriage scene, the freed slave Dionisio is a detail in the text whose purpose is to demonstrate the threat of blacks. Dionisio figures throughout the text largely in the conversation of whites, with a representation that is largely indirect; characters speak of him but he appears infrequently. What is significant about his few direct appearances is that he must be immediately pushed off the page into silence. He is therefore not simply a museum exhibit, static and easily controlled; more than that, Dionisio exists as a sort of latent threat who continues to be present as a threat even when absent. Indeed, when he finally

comes into the scene of the colored people's dance, he is vested with the potential to disturb the plot. He approaches speaking in a dynamic fashion because in an argument with Cecilia, Dionisio nearly reveals the secret of her race. Although her race is no secret to the reader because of earlier veiled discussion between Don Cándido and other white characters, the narrator insists that this black character cannot reveal the identity of Cecilia's father.⁷

As a character, Dionisio reinforces the project of a Creole nation insofar as he is placed in the position of using the disturbing quality of blackness to break away from the colonies and to consolidate white Creole power. He motivates the plot by representing blackness, a blackness empowered by a secret that would unite whites and blacks by revealing that they share similar blood and that Cecilia, the cipher of the nation—her name symbolically meaning “blind”—is actually born of this bond. The secret is therefore told only through allusions among white characters, but controlled in the mouths of blacks. If Dionisio were to be allowed to make Cecilia's character aware that she is part black, this would constitute a self-knowledge that would destabilize all of white Creole identity. Everyone knows—black and white alike—that white Creole power is based on the concept of pure Creole whiteness, but that this ‘purity’ is, in all rigor, more myth than fact. If the secret is to be exposed or mentioned, then it should happen through the white narrative voice and not the black voice, for if the black voice were to have such dynamic power, it would occupy the site of national narration, and, at the same time, fatally expose the already tenuous myth of white Creole racial purity. Dionisio effectively knows that white Creole purity is nothing but a myth, or at least has the power to destabilize it, thereby destabilizing the premise of Creole superiority, and must therefore be contained by the Creole narrator/writer by being interrupted and prohibited from communicating his knowledge. And so Dionisio's threat—his knowledge about the racial impurity of the quintessential symbol of the nation—persists as something that the white narrator must indefinitely suppress, thereby affirming his own power as against a continually controlled threat. The potentially disturbing black voice is silenced and the scene comes to an abrupt close.

Just as we have seen with each progressive step of incorporating blackness into the text through use of character types, historical figures, and museum speech (each of which requires the Creole writer to simultaneously control and contain the power of those figures upon incorporation), likewise, the movement of speech from museum speech to dynamic speech requires the writer to curtail the potential of that very plot-moving speech to make incursions into his domain of power. Therefore, the Creole writer allows the dark voices to come only to the brink of dynamic speech, but without actually advancing the plot. Just at the point when the black character might utter something that would advance the plot, the narrator, whose voice is the analog of the white Creole writer, silences the dark character and speaks in his place. Paradoxically, then, the aesthetic tool of representing increasingly “realistic” voices (in that they move away from museum-like stasis and toward dynamic agency) ends with the writer's abrupt curtailing of this very “realistic” narrative and the reappropriation of narrative control so as to preserve, at all costs, the dominant scheme of power. At the point where the black characters move to the very edge of moving the plot, the narrator intervenes and moves it instead. The narrator's power, which equates to the white Creole author's power, is all

that we see at these moments of silencing the potential black agency. The moment of intervention is laid bare necessarily by the author as he struggles for control against the very characters that he has created to assert that same control. Indeed, during the final scene of *Cecilia Valdés*, Villaverde's voice bisects communication among his characters in an attempt to control the darker characters in his text.

The final scene of the text concludes in an excessively brief manner that is universally noted by critics, but, as yet, has not been assigned a theoretical explanation consonant with the supposed "errors" in reproducing black speech. Comparing the final pages of the narrative to the way in which this black aesthetic functions, we arrive at the dovetailing of speech and narrative intervention. I will argue that the white Creole narrator intervenes here in an effort to maintain control over the plot movement of the text and the writing of the nation.

By the final scene of *Cecilia Valdés*, Doña Rosa has finally confronted Cándido about Leonardo's affair with Cecilia. Perhaps because the father finds that the situation resonates with his own past and thus has already failed at his indirect and feeble attempts to put an end to this affair, Doña Rosa finally takes matters into her own hands. She tells Leonardo in no uncertain terms "de que es hora de que suelte[s] el peruétano de la cachuela" and to move on to marrying Isabel, a suitable white Creole bride (550). On the night of Isabel and Leonardo's wedding, José Dolores appears suddenly at Cecilia's door:

¡José Dolores!—exclamó ella echándole los brazos al cuello, anegada en lágrimas—¿Qué buen ángel te envía a mí?

—Vengo—repuso él con hosco semblante y tono de voz terrible—, porque me dio el corazón que Cecilia podía necesitar me.

—¡José Dolores! ¡José Dolores de mi alma! Este casamiento no debe efectuarse.

—¿No?

—No.

—Pues cuente mi Cecilia que no se efectuará.

Sin más se desprendió el de sus brazos y salió a la calle.

Cecilia, a poco, con el pelo desmadejado y el traje suelto corrió a la puerta y gritó de nuevo: —¡José! ¿José Dolores? ¡A *ella*, a *él* no!

Inútil advertencia. El músico ya había doblado la esquina de la calle de las Damas. (551)

Needless to say, José Dolores reaches the chapel just before Leonardo and Isabel wed. While Villaverde does not depict the moment when Leonardo is stabbed, the narrator informs us that Isabel's white silk gown is spattered with blood and that the knife penetrates straight to Leonardo's heart (552). The narrator then concludes, in the very last paragraph of the text, that Doña Rosa subsequently learns the truth about Cecilia's origins and becomes increasingly vengeful, and thus Cecilia, rather than José Dolores, is ultimately tried for Leonardo's murder. The narrator also states that Cecilia is eventually confined to the Santa Paula hospital in macabre reunion with her mother, representing the victimized *mulata* taken into colonial society's care—and, the text would have us conclude, oppressive—order. Dionisio's fate is also clear: some years later, he is found

guilty for the murder of Tondá, for which he had been imprisoned; he is thus brought back into the narrative on the final page only to be institutionalized and punished. Why, then, is José Dolores's fate left open-ended? It is telling that the author's last mention of him describes his tone of voice as "terrible" and his face as "hosco" (550). This description effectively aligns José Dolores with the same aesthetic prevalent in the opening scene of the novel, in which blackness is represented—and later glossed by Villaverde himself, as earlier discussed—as a grotesque threat to the social order, and, therefore, as a vehicle for channeling Creole anxiety about the real-life black social element.

In the final analysis, José Dolores is not given any agency, but is instead written and silenced into a dangerous criminality. Because his actions are neither completed nor accounted for, he retains the possibility of becoming round—and embodies, therefore, the possibility of a criminality that could move from a latent to an active status. As a character, therefore, he is not only statically flat, but also actively quashed—that is, pressed from the threat of roundness back into flatness. Bearing this in mind, José Dolores represents the possibility of eluding the white narrator's national design. The narrator's voice does not resolve the repressed racial fear so that, by presenting an unstable element, he may step in to control the text over and over again. José Dolores is pushed off the page, thus his uncertain fate threatens to destabilize white Creole authority, and this assures the continual narrative reassertion of that authority. The ambiguity surrounding Dionisio's unresolved status creates a power gap precisely at the intersection of black dynamic speech and narrative intervention.

In the same way that José Dolores embodies a continual black threat that must be represented—but also suppressed—to affirm white Creole power, we have seen that Dionisio must be silenced so as not to expose the fact that Creole whiteness is not as pure as the dominant Creole class would have it seem. The threat that these black characters pose to the white Creole order is anticipated by the opening carriage scene, in which blackness underscores a latent threat to the Creole social order and thus calls for its containment. We have seen that, throughout the text, the two characters of Dionisio and José Dolores and the aesthetic of blackness are controlled but nevertheless went on to point to an uncontrollable problem—something that, like dynamic speech, threatens to go beyond the margins of the national narrative.

Narrative intervention creates tension around flat representations that threaten to become round precisely because it seeks to silence something whose very strength and purpose for appearing in the text originates from the fact of its maximal "realism": this "thing" seemingly desires to speak. Thus, behind narrative intervention, one not only finds the white Creole writer's struggle for control, but an anxiety about the racial purity of Creole national identity. The nation that is affirmed by white Creoles positions the black as the criminal in order to consolidate its own power and identity. By signifying or underscoring not only their own control of blackness or black national features, but the anxiety surrounding these, the white Creole text requires the cyclical consolidation of this national identity, thereby thwarting the possible existence of an alternative model of the nation in which the black would hypothetically speak for himself and destabilize the hegemonic position of whiteness. However, as we will see in Villaverde's case, such a

positioning of the black and the use of narrative intervention to control blackness—specifically black speech where it threatens to become dynamic—marks the black voice as a site of power and thus has the effect of opening the text to further intervention by authors concerned with the national subject.

Sofía

Martín Morúa Delgado, a formidable critic of Villaverde and rival novelist, enters into critical dialogue with *Cecilia Valdés* precisely in the mark of this narrative treatment of blackness. Whereas other critics largely applauded Villaverde's *costumbrista* technique, Morúa Delgado censured the use of character types, negligent language, and "historicism" in *Cecilia Valdés* and, from there, claimed that Villaverde "no ha podido aún desposeerse del maligno espíritu de aquellos tiempos, y se manifiesta poderosamente inficionado de la endemia colonial, es decir, dominado por las preocupaciones de aquel vergonzoso período" (78–9). This author and critic further stated that Villaverde "quiere hablar y habla; pero lo hace con tan mala suerte, que pone a los interlocutores un lenguaje que no les caracteriza" (83). Morúa Delgado equates what he perceives to be a flawed *costumbrista* aesthetic with its politics of hegemony. And so Morúa Delgado interprets Villaverde—along with the entire school of Creole *costumbrismo*—as a symptom of colonial power and politics rather than as its denunciation. Morúa Delgado's most penetrating critique would come in his rewriting of *Cecilia Valdés* in the form of *Sofía* (1891), a novel that will now serve as counterpoint to our reading of the use of speech and narrative intervention in *Cecilia Valdés*. My interpretation of *Sofía* will emphasize the way in which Morúa Delgado, the son of a black slave woman and white man, seems to have taken note of how Villaverde's narrative intervention marked the black voice as a site of power. In my estimation, Morúa Delgado sees what other critics had missed: the relationship between black dynamic speech and repressive narrative intervention.

In Morúa Delgado's text, *Sofía* appears as a white girl who is forced into slavery and not as a freed black *mulata* like *Cecilia*. While *Cecilia* was blind to her origins, *Sofía*—her name meaning "knowledge"—knows and understands her condition. *Sofía*'s younger sister, *Magdalena*, tells her that her potential love interest, *Federico*, is her brother, whereas *Cecilia* was never aware of her relationship to *Leonardo* because no character succeeded in informing her of this matter. *Sofía* is also aware that she is white, and not *mulata*. This accentuates the fact that *Sofía* wishes to marry *Federico* not because she desires to be white through racial mixing, but because she needs a white social status in order to be free. In Morúa Delgado's novel, the racial hierarchy that unjustly confines *Sofía* works against the whites themselves, and not the blacks. In *Cecilia Valdés*, *Cándido* and *Rosa Gamboa*'s wealth is generated by slavery and their criminality is disguised in secrets and the denial of this circumstance. All discussion of money and race, implicit and obscured in Villaverde's text, appears in plain light in Morúa Delgado's. To wit, in *Sofía*, the poverty of the Peninsular *Nudoso del Tronco* explicates his insatiable greed and poor treatment of his daughter *Sofía*. In fact, because *Sofía* is white, Morúa Delgado's text positions whiteness—and no longer blackness—as the victim of white greed itself. Thus, Morúa Delgado takes Villaverde's critique of colonial culture one step further by suggesting that all whites—and this would include white Creoles—must come to terms not only with their poor treatment of blacks and the idea of racial impurity, but also with

white immorality and greed, which Morúa Delgado would seem to view as the slave system's driving force.

Villaverde is saying that Cecilia Valdés winds up in jail because of the culture of Peninsular slave trading, which is predicated on secrecy. Morúa Delgado, on the other hand, is saying that this secrecy is not the patrimony of the colonial order, but also of the Creole elite, where there are, in truth, no real secrets, but only the pretense of secrets whose purpose is to disguise the pure greed and immorality of the upper classes. Thus, in the text of *Sofía*, words left unspoken in *Cecilia Valdés* are converted into direct statements. For instance, let us recall that Magdalena informs Sofía of her race without any narrative intervention, whereas in Dionisio's and María de Regla's confrontations with Cecilia, communication is constricted. Because there is no pretense of secrecy and no aspiration toward realism, Morúa Delgado does not critique Villaverde's model by constructing a pure inversion (e.g., misrepresenting white characters in the same way that black characters had been misrepresented), but rather creates an allegorical exposé of the mechanisms of power that undergird Villaverde's aesthetic, principally that of narrative intervention. In Villaverde's text, we have examined the two purposes of narrative intervention as silencing and criminalizing the black so that white purity may be maintained. Realizing that white purity is built upon a racial hierarchy, Morúa Delgado turns the same white Creole racial categories against their creators, and, therefore subverts the racialized hegemony that these categories serve to support.

While Villaverde's text attempts to establish and support a full series of racial categories, Morúa Delgado's deconstructs these categories by employing them unconventionally to defamiliarize the reader with their original function. *Cecilia Valdés*'s purpose has been to categorize a national subject through museum speech and then intervene when dynamic speech threatens to interfere with such classification. *Sofía*'s purpose is to bring the dynamic speech of blacks and whites alike to the forefront of the page in order to expose the elements that other writers continually repressed in order to maintain their own order based on racial hierarchy. Morúa Delgado throws Creole order into disorder by exposing that which is abjectified, marginalized, and silenced. By filling sites of power with the voices of dynamic characters, Morúa Delgado forces the carefully maintained order or narrative structure of *Cecilia Valdés* to bear the weight of a new national image that leaves no room for secrets, and this causes the previous national order or structure as represented in Villaverde's text to crack beyond repair.

Morúa Delgado accomplishes this deconstruction by inverting the logic of *Cecilia Valdés* while keeping the same plot structure. The critical moment of this logical inversion comes at the end of the novel—echoing the importance of the final scenes of *Cecilia Valdés*—where the dark-skinned *mulato* figures of José Dolores and Dionisio repeat in the final scene of Morúa Delgado's *Sofía*, in the form of two "Liberato" figures. At this point in the novel, Sofía has been hospitalized and has passed away and Nudoso del Tronco has been murdered, but the narrator foreshadows that yet another tragedy will occur. With both the equivalents of the Peninsular slave trader and the female protagonist removed from the narrative, this time the narrative will center on the Liberato alone, whose characterization is achieved almost exclusively through visual features:

Serían las nueve aproximadamente, cuando entró en la Plaza de Armas un hombre envuelto en un burdo chaquetón de los que se daban a los esclavos. El individuo no podía hacerse más sospechoso, pues, sobre de no ser fría la noche, que antes bien era calurosa, aunque corría el mes de febrero, llevaba de tal manera calado su estropeado sombrero calañés negro, que le cubría la frente hasta los ojos, y miraba a unos y a otros con la más aviesa intención que puede suponerse, y como quien busca a determinado sujeto para asunto no menos determinado. (156)

Morúa Delgado describes the dark figure's intentions as "aviesa" just before he points to the fact that, as this character passes by, people in the square remark, "Es un mulato," and "Algo malo trae ése" (157). Accordingly, a guard calls the figure over and asks who he is and for whom he works, thereby assuming, because of his dress, that he is, in fact, a slave. But when the guard rips off the character's hat, he discovers in astonishment that he is not a slave, but a *mulato*, and the townspeople begin to stare. Indeed, a very similar hat concealed the face of an unknown figure at the opening scene of *Cecilia Valdés*, in which the troublesome air of mystery and ambiguity that dominates the novel is established. In Villaverde's text, the identity of this figure is never disclosed. As Morúa Delgado's text advances, the *mulato* quickly reaches into his jacket, pulls out a gun, and kills the guard, now called a "representante de la ley," who then falls to the floor "bañado en su propia sangre" (157).

It is because the white guard thinks he is in control of a figure certain to be a slave that he draws the *mulato* near. In this case, the guard's assumption brings about his own demise. The ambiguity between slave and *mulato* underscores the white inability to control the black which occurs because the white clings too firmly to prescribed categories—here, that of codified dress—and not on the reality of that which is visible—namely, that the character has *mulato* features in spite of his slave attire. Static racial categories obfuscate a more dynamic and complex reality. One might note that this guard is none other than a white character type who is a pure symbol of a law that acts but does not see—he upholds the logic of the museum without being able to enter into the terrain of dynamism, belying his incapacity to write the nation.

As the scene advances, a young boy standing by exclaims, "Ah, Liberato, desgraciado" and everyone around him repeats "Liberto, se llama Liberato el asesino" while they forget to "perseguir al agresor que no había perdido el tiempo, y huyendo había desaparecido" (157). Here, Morúa Delgado substitutes, in pointed symbolism, a racial category for freed slaves for a proper name. As word of the murder disperses through the crowd and witnesses affirm that "Liberato" is, in fact, the killer's name, Doctor Jústiz and the judge hear of the news and are confused. They do not realize that this Liberato is a new murderer, for they have just put another *liberato* in jail for having murdered Nudoso del Tronco. They falsely conflate the murder of the white municipal guard with that of Nudoso del Tronco, having both taken place at the hand of a "liberato." Since the "Liberato" who has killed Nudoso del Tronco is already in jail, Doctor Jústiz and the judge conclude that the killer has been captured, failing to understand that they are two, and not one, in number. Therefore, they do not pursue the "liberato" who killed the

official because they assume he has already been put behind bars. As they assure the crowd that the “liberato” is under control in jail, the text breaks off into ceaseless chatter:

—Sí, durmiendo estaba Liberato y todos le acusaban de un nuevo crimen.
 —¿Quién quita que tampoco el infeliz haya cometido el que se le imputa?
 —Las apariencias engañan. —Casi me atrevería a creer que Liberato no es el asesino del señor Nudoso del Tronco. —Yo no diré tanto; pero la verdad es que todos los que han visto a Liberato dicen que no parece que sea culpable. (159)

Presumably, the crowd doesn’t recognize the imprisoned Liberato as the murderer of Nudoso del Tronco, having witnessed the crime of an altogether different “liberato.” All “liberatos” are accused for the action of one as the use of a single character’s name comes to signify an entire racial category. It is this miscommunication that, ironically, allows both Liberatos to go free. As the narration goes on, the narrator’s intervention does not silence the crowd but grants it dynamic authority by explaining how the gossip of that night leads to the imprisoned Liberato’s freedom. Because this liberation stems from confusion in the use of the term “liberato,” the white Creole order falls victim to its own speech, trapped in the rigid categories of museum speech and unable, therefore, to see the dynamic presence of black characters that moves beyond those categorical definitions. Their adherence to the categorizing code of speech is an analog for the judicial order, and so the symbolic inability to see the plurality behind a monolithic code condemns the entire Creole social project to failure because theirs is a system that is terminally incapable of seeing the reality of the nation. This fact is made apparent by the incorporation of phrases such as “Las apariencias engañan” (159). Thus, Morúa Delgado turns the “realism” of *costumbrismo* squarely on its head by implying that it is based on artificial constructs and not on an empirical social reality that was much more dynamic.

In *Cecilia Valdés*, Dionisio’s guilt is transferred onto all blacks and this guilt is used to mark José Dolores as particularly threatening because he goes unpunished. In *Sofía* an inversion occurs: the guilt of an individual is transferred onto a racial category. The category is blamed while both individuals themselves run free. While the voices of society have not come to peace with the murder at the end of *Sofía*—for the novel does not resolve the crowd’s heated discussion—it is nevertheless clear that they trust in the power and truth of the law to make sense of what they believe they see. Additionally, in the very final lines of the text, a receipt is found that documents the money Nudoso del Tronco received when he sold Sofía as a slave, a document that causes legal forfeit of Sofía’s inheritance, even if she had been alive and freed to receive it. Knowledge generated by white speech and writing is finally turned around not only so that the Liberatos escape, but also so that the white girl who had been enslaved is robbed of her inheritance. At the end of the text, the voices of whites in *Sofía* produce consequences that benefit the black, rather than cast him as a criminal, and the ambiguity surrounding racial categories now works against them. Their writing, furthermore, serves only to alienate white Creoles from their own wealth and power.

When rewriting *Cecilia Valdés*, Morúa Delgado returns the black to the page as an individual who makes a mockery of his racial category. Now, the logic of the white Creole

class appears barbarous. This does not occur because Morúa Delgado posits a black with agency, but because he exposes the mechanism of flattening, silencing, and criminalizing characters by means of which Creole *costumbrismo* had controlled the black. To do so, Morúa Delgado criminalizes the black directly and then allows him to escape unjustly during the final scene of his text, thus rewriting *Cecilia Valdés* in a way that calls attention to the site of power in Villaverde's text and undermining its function as a support of Creole power. I have argued that these sites have authorized cyclical narrative intervention, which serves to keep blacks as the object and not the subject of national narratives. In Morúa Delgado's text, white Creole trafficking in slavery robs whites of their own aesthetic patrimony. Such a narrative, when read in unison with *Cecilia Valdés*, reveals, through its carefully constructed difference with respect to a nevertheless recognizable fundamental similarity of plot, a critique of Villaverde's racialized class politics based on white privilege.

In Morúa Delgado's *Sofía*, not only is racial fear brought out; the author delves into the consequences of believing what we see, which is precisely racial features over what is most logical. Here, paperwork, and laws we believe in, become misleading and result in true social injustice as they are compounded with racial fear. Thus, the two stories come together to form an intriguing conclusion. The very fact that voices are silenced at the end of Villaverde's text allows truths of racial fears within Cuban society to lie dormant, behind the page. Because Morúa Delgado explicitly articulates all that remains implicit in *Cecilia Valdés*, thereby exposing the greed of whites, the myth of racial impurity, and the dependency on racial categories as a structural support of Creole power, he is able to conclude a project that Villaverde had not truly concluded. He fills in the holes in Villaverde's narrative, denying that narrative of its power to consolidate a national image on the basis of such racially exclusionary representations. Villaverde, like the other Creole *costumbristas*, sought to galvanize Cuban society against colonial rule and its ills—namely, the hegemony of the sugar aristocracy and slavery—thereby producing historical closure. Morúa Delgado, on the other hand, seems to suggest that such closure was impossible and incomplete until not only the cruelty of the slave system was exposed, but also the colonizing nature of the *costumbrista* aesthetic of blackness designed to allow white Creoles to become the successors of a colonial government.

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Notes

- ¹ Verena Martínez Alier's statistics document that, ten years after the agreement to end slavery was reached in 1817, the slave population increased exponentially in Cuba because of the collapse of slavery in Saint Domingue and the independence of Haiti. Martínez Alier reports the increase in the slave population to have jumped from 199,000 to 287,000 blacks on the island. By 1846, there were an estimated 324,000 slaves and 149,000 free blacks, constituting 53% of the island's total population (166). This population haunted Peninsular rule especially because of the memory of the Haitian slave rebellion. The establishment of the independent black state on the island of Hispaniola in 1804 instilled a fear that Cuba would have the same fate.
- ² William Luis describes Richard Madden and Del Monte's communication at length when discussing Cirilo Villaverde's manipulation of Manzano's *Autobiografía*. See Chapter Two in *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* (38–39).
- ³ To exemplify, Ventura Pascual Ferrer published a series of *costumbrista* articles in 1798.
- ⁴ Álvarez García notes that in the 1882 version “los negros bozales y ladinos, los catalanes, los hombres cultos, los criollos ricos y los tenderos españoles hablan de modo diferente” (330). Similarly, Lazo avows that “Villaverde se acomoda al hablar peculiar de cada personaje según su cultura, su clase social y el tipo de trabajo a que se dedica” (270). Rodríguez Herrera states that “Es una novedad de gran importancia que en la edición definitiva, la de 1882, el autor haya puesto en boca de sus personajes el lenguaje y vocabulario propios de cada uno de ellos, conforme a su instrucción o preparación particular” (157). Because the discussion of language brings forth the text's catalogue of characters, one may view how the use of language and the desire to create a social taxonomy are one and the same project.
- ⁵ Finally, a minor point is that Rodríguez Herrera pays Villaverde particular attention because Peninsular writers such as Lope de Rueda had attempted in the past to adapt black speech. It is unclear whether Rodríguez Herrera wishes to say that Villaverde has done this better than Spaniards, credit Villaverde for succeeding in his imitation of Spanish practices, or merely draw the connection between the two. The relationship between Villaverde and Peninsular literature merits further critical attention (159). Rodríguez Herrera describes “la tarea dura” of establishing “las precisas [linguistic] distinciones” (157). Here, not only does he mention the variety of character types for whom Villaverde would account, but also the fact that the inclusion of their speech “redunda en beneficio del lector inteligente que sabe discernir en cada caso.” The assertion by Rodríguez Herrera that intelligent readers would have been able to determine Villaverde's shortcomings because of the fact that they were literate and would have searched for problems in the text implies a general assumption that all educated people had knowledge of local accents, affirming the game of social taxonomy as one generalized within the Creole elite.
- ⁶ Although Cecilia is nicknamed “La virgencita de bronce” throughout the text, an epithet that implies a non-white skin tone, María de Regla, Dionisio's wife and the wet nurse of Cecilia and the Gamboa family, states that Cecilia looks identical to Adela. At one point, she encounters Cecilia and exclaims to herself “¡La misma frente! ¡La misma nariz! ¡La misma boca! ¡Los mismos ojos! ¡Hasta el hoyito en la barba! ¡Sí, su pelo, su cuerpo, su aire, su propio ángel!” (546). The text makes clear that the forehead, nose, mouth, and body are particularly racialized features in nineteenth-

century Cuba. Underscoring this point, in the opening scene the narrator remarks on Don Cándido Gamboa's notable features, which are similar to Cecilia's. These include "la nariz, que tenía aguileña, los ojos bastantes vivos, el rostro ovalado y la barba pequeña" (15). The narrator stresses the relationship of these features to whiteness when he describes the physical appearance of Don Cándido in an effort to define his race: "El color de ésta y el del cabello, las sombras del sombrero y de las paredes alterosas del convento vecino, lo oscurecían tal vez sin ser negro" (15–16). Cecilia's appearance is not only remarkable because it is identical to her half-sister's and similar to her father's, but because Cecilia's features are those of a white person.

- ⁷ Communication is also constrained when María de Regla speaks to Cecilia and alludes to her relationship and resemblance to the family, as Doris Sommer notes in "Who Can Tell: The Blanks in Villaverde." At this point, Cecilia asks "¿Conque tanto me parezco a [Adela]? Ya me lo habían dicho algunos amigos que la conocen de vista" (546). Rather than answer her question directly, María de Regla gives an answer that is disturbing and improbable. Referring to Cecilia and Leonardo—her love interest and, unbeknownst to Cecilia, her half-brother—María de Regla warns the girl that "los dos están en pecado mortal" without offering any further explanation (547).

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