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### Publication Date

2012

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Regarding American Customs

By

Javier Jimenez

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Francine Masiello, Chair  
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Spring 2012

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Abstract

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Javier Jimenez

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Francine Masiello, Chair

This dissertation studies the representation of custom in nineteenth-century Cuban proto-nationalist, anti-slavery novels along with Brazilian and U.S. novels of the same time period. I base my readings on Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*, Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés*, Machado de Assis' *Quincas Borba*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Through these novels, I study how the representation of custom within these novels elucidates the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and ethics. Narratives of custom, particularly of Spanish American costumbrismo, comprise a literary genre that emerges from the rise of print culture and journalism in urban centers in the mid-eighteenth century and enters the novel shortly thereafter. Custom sketches or articles are short, thick in description of elements from social reality, and populated by character types (the dandy, the pedant, the intellectual, etc.), set scenes, and descriptions of local color. Drawn from social reality and often critiquing that reality, representations of custom present themselves as intrinsic to their social spaces, as traditional, and thus as always already historical. But, in fact, these representations are contemporaneous writings based on a mythic or imagined past. Though ostensibly custom sketches narrativize core practices or values proposed as originary, the historicity of the types and scenes of these sketches is rootless. Thus, these sketches narrate an imagined past in order to establish social values that tie or attempt to tie communities together in the present and into perpetuity.

I study custom sketches and manners within 19th century novels as distinct novelistic discourses that enter into a dialogical relationship with the other narrative elements in the novel. This dialogical relationship is marked by a troubled coexistence, as these discourses are often in competition with one another. In *Sab*, the confrontations between custom and other novelistic discourses, namely romanticism, are used to expose a linkage between tradition and social decay. Gómez de Avellaneda suggests that ending slavery and mitigating patriarchy by appropriating tradition leads to no emancipation at all. In *Cecilia Valdés*, the encounters between custom and novelistic discourses demonstrate how custom can work in tandem with liberal politics to produce, paradoxically, a political project that seeks national independence by instantiating a liberal colonial order. Lastly, the interaction between custom and the novel, in *Quincas Borba* and *The Scarlet Letter*, uncovers how manners, the sphere of custom marked by description of social behavior as opposed to

character types, mark subjects as aliens and as individuals. Though manners make possible and stabilize alienation, the quixotic and irreverent elements in *Quincas Borba* and *The Scarlet Letter*, respectively, are both the sources of alienation *and* of potential emancipation. Parallel to the potentiality constitutive of ethics, manners carry within themselves latent alternative notions of the good that may be potentially liberating. Altogether, these treatments of custom open to a double reading of repression and freedom and of liberal social critique and colonial power.

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## Preface

The publication of Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* in 1991 had a profound effect on the study of nationalism in and through literature in the field of Latin American literature. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Sommer studies how nineteenth-century national novels—novels that quickly became canonical, patriotic novels of and for their respective nations—represented most salient political issues of the era through the erotics of romance. For Sommer, “erotic passion...[was] more [an] opportunity (rhetorical and otherwise) to bind together heterodox constituencies: competing regions, economic interests, races, religions” (14). Following Anderson's arguments regarding the role of culture in nationalism and Frederic Jameson's assertion that “third-world texts are necessarily...allegorical” (69), Sommer develops a mode of reading and interpreting nineteenth-century novels that is self-avowedly allegorical.<sup>1</sup> Sommer's contribution allowed a re-examination of national novels that were often little studied or little read outside of their own countries or origins. It taught scholars to explore the rather strange romantic plots of these novels and make connections with the politics, social concerns, and demographics from which these novels emerge. Novels, rightly, became a fount of information for historical, cultural, ideological, and even anthropological information for their contexts. These developments were not only a result of Sommer's intervention; developments in new historicist, postcolonial, and cultural studies also broadened the analyses of novels in other areas that were not purely literary.

I believe, however, that somewhere along the way, as often happens with approaches to literature that become institutionalized, reading these novels became naïve in the sense that these novels became more about their “contents”—their plots and the relevance of these plots to understanding the nation—at the expense of how the formal elements of the novels figured into their signification. In other words, *Sab* was an antislavery Cuban novel remarkable for the undying love a mulatto slave for his criollo mistress (and cousin); the novel radiographed the gender and racial sociocultural formations of the day. It also provided a good deal of “data” of the land and people of Cuba. But formally, the novel exhibits an overdetermined Romanticism that can be cloying. Indeed, between the defense of the slave's subjectivity and his trite unrequited love, this novel has often inspired an almost-permanent eye roll from students. Likewise, *Cecilia Valdés* is often praised for its mapping of Havana as an urban space in the 1830s, and it provides remarkable scenes as to how criollos, mulattos (slave and free), and black slaves interacted on the streets, in the famed *bailes de cuna*, and in the interior spaces of domestic life. But as to Villaverde's claim to realism in the novel's 1879 preface? Well, he's realistic but no Balzac. An interesting evaluation, perhaps, for scholars of French realism, but for who else?

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<sup>1</sup> For Sommer, allegory is “a narrative structure in which one line is a trace of the other, in which each helps to write the other...[She] describe[s] the allegory in Latin America's national novels as an interlocking, not parallel, relationship between erotics and politics” (42-43).

I set out to write this dissertation in order to make inroads in understanding the novels I study in terms of their formal as well as their political significance. Literature as a social text is an important critical position, but its importance is diminished if literature becomes purely instrumental. For these reasons, I've set out to study the literariness of the novels I examine by analyzing the entrance of the "minor" genre of costumbrismo, or custom sketch, into the larger genre of the novel. Thus, my dissertation studies the representation of custom as a distinct literary style in nineteenth-century Cuban proto-nationalist, antislavery novels along with Brazilian and U.S. novels of the same time period. My readings are based on Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*, Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés*, Machado de Assis' *Quincas Borba*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. If novels like *Sab* and *Cecilia Valdés* prominently feature *cuadros de costumbre*, in the Brazilian and U.S. cases, the custom sketch is attenuated, expressing itself as social manners (the case of *Quincas Borba*). Across this development, I study how the representation of custom within these novels elucidates the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and ethics. As I explain in chapter one, the representation of custom, particularly of Spanish-American costumbrismo, comprises a literary genre that emerges from the rise of print culture and journalism in urban centers in the mid-eighteenth century and enters the novel shortly thereafter. Custom sketches or articles are short, thick in description of elements from social reality, and populated by character types (the dandy, the pedant, the intellectual, etc.), set scenes, and descriptions of local color. Drawn from social reality and often critiquing that reality, representations of custom present themselves as intrinsic to their social spaces, as traditional, and thus as always already historical. But, in fact, these representations are contemporaneous writings based on a mythic or imagined past. Though ostensibly custom sketches narrativize core practices or values proposed as originary, the historicity of the types and scenes of these sketches is rootless. Because these sketches depend on an alleged past and "known" types from society, they represent a narrative history that is actually ahistorical: they instantiate a version of the present based upon an imagined past that is supposed to be permanent. These sketches, then, ensconce values that tie or attempt to tie communities together in the present and into perpetuity. Moreover, I approach custom sketches and manners within 19th century novels as distinct novelistic discourses that enter into a dialogical relationship with the other narrative elements in the novel. This dialogical relationship is marked by a troubled coexistence, as these discourses are often in competition with one another.

By focusing on the dialogical relationship between costumbrismo and the other languages or genres in the novel, I have been able to clarify some of the questions that dog much of the criticism of these novels. In *Sab*, for example, it is difficult to ascertain why exactly the main character, the mulatto slave Sab, does not emerge as a politically emancipatory figure though the character seems to understand that he is quite capable of taking on this role. *Sab*, in essence, creates an antislavery narrative in which the exceptional slave actually does *not* want to be free, only free to love. This romantic hero is radically at odds with, ostensibly, the message of the novel: the end of slavery. Focusing on the language of costumbrismo and Romanticism in this novel allows me to deduce that both languages are insufficient to imagine Cuba from either the hyper local frame of



costumbrismo or the more worldly frame of Romanticism. *Sab* announces quite directly through its literary languages the conditions of impossibility of slave and colonial emancipation; neither costumbrismo nor Romanticism will provide the tools to conceive the end of slavery in Cuba. However, even though *Sab* is not a novel of hope in the sense of advocating for a real, political way out of slavery, it does advocate freedom from slavery, an ethical position that while unrealizable will linger as a latent remainder. This last insight is indicative of an important contribution to the field I am making: exploring the interaction of different languages, styles, and genres within these texts has helped me understand in a more rigorous way the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and ethics. As I suggest above, politics are an integral part of the field of Latin American literature. But I feature more prominently how the literary material generates meanings as a combination of aesthetic operations in order to strengthen more political readings; I also consider the ethical positions as an implication of these aesthetic operations. Critics like Bruno Bosteels have decried that the varied ethical approaches toward the study of Latin American literature are an abandonment of politics on the part of scholars. For Bosteels, more political interventions and readings are potentially more emancipatory than a pursuit of ethics (notice the ethical concern for the liberation of Latin American subjects through politics from Anglo-American and European neocolonial relations)<sup>2</sup>. But, to my mind, an engagement with ethics entails having a coherent theory of subjectivity without which politics becomes a series of proposals with no real content. Even if we arrive at a theory of the subject from the realm of politics, this theory cannot but have an ethical content, a content beyond legal rights and the proper relationship between governments and citizens. Indeed, if politics lay out a “proper” relationship between different social sites (citizens, institutions, the law, government, etc.), there can be no politics without ethics.

In this dissertation, I study texts from Cuba, Brazil, and the United States because they express a kind of a transnational Americanness, one that shares a similar yet distinct history of colonialism and slavery as well as important theoretical concerns, namely interpretation itself. These shared components mean not that Gómez de Avellaneda, Villaverde, Machado de Assis, and Hawthorne emulated or mimicked continental models of writing but that in their colonial or postcolonial contexts they were able to pick and choose, and usually combine, various literary styles. As such, these writers were not “lagging behind” the aesthetic avant-garde; they were maximizing all the literary resources at their disposal in order to write about their unique American realities. In this way, the literary periphery of the Americas functioned more like a marketplace in which both old and new literary schools were current, and writers did not have to “keep up with the times” as writers in Europe may have felt pressured to do in order to achieve success. It is through this shared history of colonialism and slavery as well as through their shared strategy of creating new literary projects out of a variety of literary modes and styles that, for me, mark them as “American” in a transnational sense. Moreover, this shared history and strategy suggests that modernity in the Americas tended toward a heterogeneity to which

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<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Bosteels’ “The Ethical Superstition,” particularly pgs. 17-18 and 20-22, in *The Ethics of Latin American Literary Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 11-23. Print).

Europeans had little access in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the interaction of American customs and a variety of European literary forms in these novels often show how the locality of custom highlights the oppressive quality of European modes of writing. This oppression was surely felt in the cultural field as well as in the market, but it was even more oppressive at the philosophical level because the theoretical underpinnings of these modes of writing understood humanity and history as universal and progressive—but “human,” “history,” “progressive,” and “universal” were defined as European. If Europe had the monopoly on epistemology, the organization of the world along ideological and political lines, and violence, American writers seem to have enjoyed a peripheral freedom from which to generate new forms of writing, feeling, and thinking. Of course, though this kind of creation of forms in the Americas took on markedly “disorderly,” rhizomatic turns (in terms of established modes of literary development and history), the relationality of literary, social, and theoretical discourses is always asymmetrical. An important aspect of this asymmetry is the potential for—and familiar appearance of—competition between Same and Other, between participants in communicative endeavors, and between meanings within language. This dynamic is why even though I draw from M.M. Bakhtin’s formulation of the novel as a literary genre populated by a multiplicity of voices and literary genres, I differ from him in that I do not believe that this multiplicity is harmonious or achieves some kind of equilibrium. Indeed, I understand the many voices and genres within the novel as often coming into competition or confrontation with each other.

The first and second chapters of the dissertation each focuses on a canonical nineteenth-century Cuban novel: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sab* and Cirilo Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel*. In “Costumbrismo and the End of Thinking in *Sab*,” I discuss the development of the genre of costumbrismo in Europe and establish its ubiquity in nineteenth-century Latin American literary production. The chapter then goes on to argue that costumbrismo posits the values of the present as already historical and that costumbrismo is markedly ahistorical. Once I outline costumbrismo, my attention turns toward the encounters between costumbrismo’s appearance in the novel, as a marker of the local, and Romanticism, as a vector of globalization. In particular, Gómez de Avellaneda alerts readers that costumbrismo presents an idyllic yet outdated view of society while Romanticism offers a flawed universality. This argument is based on the kinds of reading that costumbrismo and Romanticism entail, the former as transparent and self-evident and the latter penetrating through layers, for both kinds of reading practices in the novel are unable to cope with forces represented in the text. In the end, the individualist ethics that Romanticism posits eventually destroy the subject, Sab, and leaves Cuba at the mercy of Romanticism’s darker side, an intersubjectivity that operates like exchange value, represented by the English characters’ rapacious commercialism. Gómez de Avellaneda shows how the filling in of history and the constitution of the subject through aesthetics is ultimately loaded—overwhelmed even—by potentiality without any real recourse to transcend the individual and enter the social.

In my second chapter, “*Cecilia Valdés*: The Asymmetry of Politics and Ethics,” I analyze a *cuadro de costumbre* and a type scene of urban chaos in the streets of La Habana and argue that the novel sacrifices ethical thinking in order to enunciate a clear political

project: a liberal, independent nation state. *Cecilia Valdés* presents the encounter of type scenes of mostly urban slavery and race relations within the context of a realist, object-oriented literary mode. I point out that while the *cuadro de costumbre* establishes a specific referent, the character Cecilia Valdés, the realist mode and the narrative focalization on the character Leonardo generates a referential crisis: the *cuadro de costumbre* attempts to warn Cecilia of her fate, yet the novel seems to be an object lesson for Leonardo. In other words, though the novel is ostensibly about the evils of slavery, it becomes a novel about the preservation of the criollo class from the mulata and the racial infection she implies. Though the novel to a certain extent celebrates mulatto cultural production in La Habana, the confrontations between the novel's different literary styles and discourses ultimately reveal that the price for a free Cuban polity is the exclusion or eradication of its mulatto population. In this way, the novel suggests that a free liberal Cuba would seek to instantiate a political system that is a local or autochthonous colonial order, for in this kind of political order there is no theory of subjectivity at all but an unrelenting conceptualization of Cuba, its population, and the world as object. In replacing one referent (Cecilia) for another (Leonardo), the novel becomes the master of the voices that populate it, especially the voice of costumbrismo. In this chapter, I also review critical literature on the theoretical relationship between literature and ethics. Through this review, I note that while the political goals of the end of slavery and Cuban independence remain in force, the subjection of costumbrismo to the larger demands of the novelistic project shows a pragmatic politics that does not take into account the subject as such—at least not in its mulatto and black variants. Though the novel seeks independence from Spain and a liberal politics, the interplay of the genres within the novel suggests a liberal order that would reproduce a colonial configuration of society.

The third chapter of the dissertation, "Reconciling and Emending: Brazilian Manners in *Quincas Borba*," focuses specifically on manners as an aspect of the representation of customs separate from social types and set scenes. In *Quincas Borba*, the encounters I analyze are typical novelistic scenes, reminiscent of both Romanticism and realism, as well as reflections upon memory and illusion. I track narrative moments that reconcile or confront memory with the present and that often produce an emendation of the present, especially through delusion. These reconciliations of memory and emendations of the present show the inner workings of alienation. Moreover, the marginal position of the mad protagonist, who does not perform courtly carioca manners well, also shows how Brazilian manners are reinforced by marginality, how madness fuels and stabilizes the social differentiation of courtly life in Rio de Janeiro. Like *Don Quijote*, however, the madness that is represented in this text shows not only that the longing for a noble romantic love is ultimately a fiction that leads to death, but also that the values that undergird this desire and narrative are fallacious. For Machado de Assis realism and Brazilian manners are radically at odds. Brazilian manners are too contingent and subjective for realism to ultimately be able to cope with them. Ultimately, I interpret this novel as a novel that not only attempts a critique of Brazilian society, but that also to form reading subjects as critics.

My fourth and final chapter, "Customs and the Problem of Origins in *The Scarlet Letter*," analyzes the novel's introduction, Hawthorne's meditations titled "The Custom-House," and follows the encounters between Hester Prynne's scarlet "A" and those who view it. If in "The Custom House," Hawthorne claims that there are actual roots to which he is called to return and from which he seeks to escape, *The Scarlet Letter* significantly amplifies this problem because Hester Prynne's return to Boston is not a return to origins but to an identity originally imposed upon her and which she subsequently modifies, though by no means "original" or rooted. As in *Quincas Borba*, the marginal figure here too upholds the moral and social order, though much more consciously than Machado's protagonist. But what is most important is that though customs are revealed to be epiphenomenal, not based on a real origin, movement as transplantation emerges as the contingent, ambiguous origin of customs. In addition, through its meditations on origins, *The Scarlet Letter* points out how customs and the law were at one time inextricable. The novel does so by contrasting the conflation of religious law and civil law in Puritan New England with the separation of morality, religious or otherwise, from legal criminality in the antebellum United States. Though the narrative seeks the separation of custom and law, it represents this achievement as gradual, at best, if not improbable. Instead of linking customs to the land, cultural production by a select group, or by the performance of manners, Hawthorne ties customs and the novel to the law, history, tradition, aesthetics, and ethics.

## Acknowledgments

The pages that follow are representative of several years of intellectual work and growth on my part. But, happily, I did not engage this work on my own. I am indebted to the careful aid and attention of the members of my dissertation committee: Francine Masiello, Natalia Brizuela, Robert Kaufman, and Bryan Wagner. Each of these scholars has greatly contributed to my formation as a researcher and student of literature, art, and culture, and they have fostered a collegial relationship that has taught me to be a better mentor, mentee, and colleague. As chair of my committee, Francine Masiello guided me through the process of conceptualizing, writing, and revising this dissertation. She has worked tirelessly to help me in my intellectual endeavors, nurturing and challenging me as needed, in order to help me realize my potential as a scholar and teacher. Her mentorship has been invaluable, and I feel deeply honored to have worked with her during my time at Berkeley. I cannot fully express how I feel about the dedication and guidance of these committee members, so I will only say: thank you.

My experience at Berkeley would not have been as enlightening—and fun—without a wonderful community of fellow students and friends. The intellectual support and camaraderie I enjoyed from S. Munia Bhaumik, Karina Palau, and Tom McEnaney made my years at Berkeley truly an amazing experience. The times I spent with Mary Lee were some of the best of my life. I would also like to thank my fellow Dwinelle dwellers and dear friends: Amanda Goldstein, Andrew Leong, David Simon, Toby Warner, Andrea Gadberry, Tristram Wolff, Corey Byrnes, Colin Foard, Allen Young, Karen Spira, Natalia Valencia, Cesar Melo, Katrina Dodson, Juan Caballero, Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, and Viviana Alcazar, among them. I found kindred spirits in José Rabasa and Timothy Hampton, professors whose knowledge is so deep and who are so engaging that I constantly feel the lure of joining them in the study of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Jose Luis Passos ignited my passion for Brazilian literature, especially the work of Machado de Assis. My friends outside the academy, Miranda Lindl O’Connell, Ethan Teng, Richard Wong, and David Jacobson, all played an important role in my entering and succeeding in my academic endeavors. They have kept me grounded in ways that are essential to my happiness. Micah Westerman has ridden this often-unpredictable roller coaster with me and has given me the space to be and become who I want to be. His love and patience are constant reminders that everything will be all right—always.

None of this would have been possible without the material support of the University of California, Berkeley, the Department of Comparative Literature, and the Graduate Division. These university bodies provided me with full funding, allowing me to study and research with few concerns, as well as travel funds for study and conferences. Mine was a privileged position to be in when I began the program and is even more so now. The Department of Spanish and Portuguese has also provided with much material support and encouragement, even though I was not technically one of their own. In Spanish and Portuguese, I particularly wish to thank Veronica Lopez. Celines Villalba, who is now at Rutgers, taught me how to be language teacher. I received funding from the Center of Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, which is very much appreciated. I also wish to thank

Josephine Moreno in the Graduate Division. A very warm thanks to Erica Roberts, Kathy Barrett, Gail Ganino, and Tracy Miller: they make our lives as students possible in the Department of Comparative Literature at Berkeley.

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my family: Javier Jiménez Gordián, Lilia Lantigua, Karina and Chris Lewis, Gabriela and John Delaney, Indira Jiménez, and Jack Delaney. Your incessant love and laughter have given me the strength to achieve everything I have ever set out to accomplish.

## Chapter 1

### Costumbrismo and the End of Thinking in *Sab*

#### Not Quite There: Costumbrismo as (dis)Locator

*Sab*, published by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda in Madrid in 1841, offers a familiar novelistic world to scholars of the nineteenth-century Americas. The text is a potent antislavery, proto-feminist narrative that draws upon the formal elements of Romanticism and sentimentalism in order to mount a critique of patriarchal slavery. But more importantly, as the novelist attempts to paint a picture of the injustices of slavery and the oppression of women, she does so by sketching out its social world. In this way, *Sab* represents Cuban customs and is an expression of Cuban costumbrismo. Contemporary approaches to this narrative tend to deal with the aforementioned proto-feminist currents in the text, as well as the antislavery accents of the story.<sup>1</sup> My aim is to add to this body of work by emphasizing the novel's deployment of costumbrismo. This should not be surprising as both in nineteenth-century Cuba and Spain, as well as most of Spanish America, costumbrismo was a popular periodical form (Buena xv). Indeed, costumbrismo's centrality in *Sab* is often represented as a given.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I argue that costumbrismo and Romanticism are both working in the text, modifying each other in a particularly asymmetrical way: costumbrismo foregrounds the local and everyday calling into question the universalism that Romanticism and sentimentalism extol. In turn, Romanticism and sentimentalism unmask the indolence of costumbrismo, pointing out that the local cannot but be overwhelmed by the universalism and modernity that Romanticism and sentimentalism posit in nineteenth-century Cuba.

Costumbrismo emerges as an autonomous genre in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Its beginnings can be traced to custom sketches in England, in Joseph Addison and

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<sup>1</sup> For treatments of gender in the novel, see Reina Barreto's "Subversion in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*" in *Decimonónica* 3.1 (2006): 1-10 and Naomi Lindstrom's "El convento y el jardín: La búsqueda de espacios alternativos en *Sab*" in *Decimonónica* 4.2 (2007): 49-60. For a treatment of the antislavery narrative and race in *Sab*, see William Luis' *Literary Bondage* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> In her introduction to the novel, Catherine Davies states: "Although in many ways a typically Romantic Latin American novel (for its sensibility, idealization, melodrama and fatalistic determinism) the structure and style of the novel may be associated more closely with the 'costumbrista' genre, the novel of manners" (14). Likewise, in "The Portrait of the Slave: Ideology and Aesthetics in the Cuban Antislavery Novel," Ivan Schulman makes a case for the role of costumbrismo, along with Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, and Eclecticism, in Cuban antislavery novels (356). In a recent article, Malcolm Read places *Sab* in historical relation to Early Modern debates about Substantialism and Animism, thus de-emphasizing the sentimental Romanticism of the novel (see "Racism and Commodity Character Structure: the case of *Sab*" in the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 10:1 (2004)).

Richard Steele's *The Tatler*; in France, through Victor-Joseph Etienne custom sketches in *La Gazette de France* from about 1811; in the United States, through the writing of Washington Irving and others; in Mexico, in José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El pensador mexicano*; and in Spain, of course, in the work of Mariano José de Larra, Serafín Estévez Calderón and Ramón de Mesonero Romanos during the first half of the 19th century (Bueno x-xi). Indeed, it is through Spanish literature that the term costumbrismo comes into general currency in the nineteenth century, and though much of the critical literature on the genre of costumbrismo focuses on Iberian writing, most Spanish American nations developed their own *cuadros de costumbres*, or custom sketches, under the rubric of costumbrismo in the late eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century. Most notably, collections of custom articles were published in Latin America, such as *Los cubanos pintados por sí mismos* (1852), *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos. Tipos y costumbres nacionales por varios autores* (1854), and *Tipos y costumbres de la isla de Cuba* (1881), throughout the nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>; these collections are only the tip of the iceberg of the popularity of the genre in Latin America, which was practiced and read ubiquitously (Bueno xxvi).

But what exactly is a costumbrista text or custom sketch? According to Cuban critic Salvador Bueno, costumbrismo is, above all, a journalistic or periodical genre; it is short and attempts to paint a picture of society or segments of society, particularly as it uses social types to flesh out this societal view (x). Costumbrismo abounds in description of types, customs, vices, and the city or country. It is an autonomous genre<sup>4</sup>, yet it does not feature plot prominently partly because it is concerned with drawing society through text. In its often moralizing bent, it is reminiscent of medieval exempla, such as Don Juan Manuel's collection of short stories, *El Conde Lucanor* (1335). However, whereas Don Juan Manuel's tales often affirm the hierarchy of medieval society, the costumbrista text elaborates the emerging social and political values of bourgeois society. Thus, as an originally journalistic genre, costumbrismo is a production of the bourgeoisie for its own consumption. This point is most clear in its European dimension: Mariano José de Larra's famous narrator-observer, Fígaro, often laments of Spanish "backwardness," of the lack of industrialization and the stagnation of bureaucracy that makes daily life in Madrid, for example, provincially slow when compared to the breakneck speed and efficiency to be found in Paris and London, the centers of nineteenth-century modernity.

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<sup>3</sup> As Salvador Bueno points out, these collections and their titles echoed similar literary production in Spain and beyond, such as *Los españoles pintados por sí mismos* (1843-1844), *Head of the People: or Portraits of the English* (1840-1841), and *Les Français peints par eux mêmes* (1842).

<sup>4</sup> The critic Gioconda Marún argues vehemently for this position in *Orígenes del costumbrismo ético-social*. In making this argument, however, Marún makes a distinction between a pre-modern, moralistic "cuadro" or sketch and a Neo-Classicist, periodical "artículo costumbrista" that offers socio-ethical criticisms. The reasons for this split in the periodization seems puzzling, unless it is to argue that the post-French Revolution periodical pieces are "modern" and therefore "autonomous." For a detailed treatment of his issues, see chapters 1-3. My point is to show highlight that the genre is indeed autonomous, but that it does not dispense with description as its main narrative mode.



Much like its Iberian counterpart, Spanish American costumbrismo focuses on the asynchronicity of its own modernity in relation to the European metropolitan center. In this way, costumbrismo is engaged with the question of modernity—of who and what is modern and why—in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> But it also brings to bear the question of Spanish America's relation to Europe. In the Cuban case, the relationship to the continent until the end of the nineteenth century is clearly a colonial one; in form and function, despite brief periods of the relaxation of Spanish policies, Cuba is a colony of Spain until 1898, when it becomes a neocolonial holding of the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War. In choosing to write custom sketches, Spanish American authors were using the product of a bourgeois institution to narrate their social reality in contexts that were often radically different from its European manifestations. In Cuba, costumbrista expression makes sense since mostly the members of the upper class, the landed, white criollo elite practiced it. But this criollo elite was certainly not bourgeois. In fact, they were wealthy landowners of varying degrees of political and ideological stripes; their status derived from the production of agricultural goods through the use of black or mulatto slave labor. That some of these landowners were educated in and espoused Enlightenment ideals, even the abolition of slavery, only masks that the literary techniques of costumbrismo and the social reality of Cuba, though often in tune, emerge out of a virtuoso two-step, a point-counterpoint, that will open up uniquely local yet far reaching discussions on Cuban society and on the place of Cuba and Cubans on the world stage.

While Spanish and European custom writers developed mostly urban social types such as the bachelor, the bureaucrat, and the dandy,<sup>6</sup> Cuban costumbrista texts add to this cast of characters such famous figures as the mulatta, the domestic slave, the plantation slave, and the guajiro (or rural peasant). This last figure is an important one because it helps to highlight that in Spanish America rural peoples and the land they reside on are important protagonists of costumbrismo—and every other writing genre—as their peripheral status nonetheless occupies a central role in Spanish American societies, particularly as these people and places produce the natural resources at the center of Spanish American economies throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century. In Cuba, costumbrista writers wrote not only about customs and manners of La Habana but also of their native cities and regions. For example, Gaspar Betancourt

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<sup>5</sup> In "On Englishmen, Women, Indians, and Slaves: Modernity in the Nineteenth-century Spanish-American Novel," Catherine Davies draws on Carlos Alonso's essay, "The Burden of Modernity," to point out that "there is an acute awareness that modernity was potentially coextensive with dependency" (314). Davies argues that women Spanish-American writers stage "paradoxical strategies of compliance and resistance [to modernity]" in order to "inscribe the subaltern (women, Indians, and slaves) into liberal discourse as subjects rather than objects of modernity" (314). My reading of the paradoxical relationship between costumbrismo and Romanticism in *Sab* dovetails with Davies' argument, though ultimately my reading does not allow for the successful completion of this inscription project.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mariano José de Larra's *Artículos* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1995).

Cisnero's sketches usually focus on the customs of his native Puerto Príncipe, present-day Camagüey, while José María Cárdenas often took up the question of the country and its plantations.<sup>7</sup> Cuba's costumbrista production is representative of a focus both on the customs of life in the city, especially the capital city, as well as those of the peripheral cities, provinces, and rural areas. Moreover, in its description of urban and rural spaces, costumbrismo positively valorizes these spaces as this description often praises the local character: its natural, social, and historical components. Through this description, costumbrismo, even when critiquing them, represents local character and tradition, identifying the local community's self or sameness.

Costumbrista writing's emphasis on social types and the local come together to highlight or correct social ills. Indeed, costumbrismo, especially Cuban costumbrismo, is quite didactic and even moralizing. However, this didacticism is delivered through the humor of satire. In this way, costumbrismo seeks to paint a picture of society, sometimes even denouncing it, through a humorous lens. Thus, it is, again, reminiscent of Medieval and Renaissance texts that seek to educate by entertaining their audiences. However, as a bourgeois genre, costumbrismo seeks to elevate and stabilize bourgeois values and ideals. As a genre, European costumbrismo opens up the space for voicing the views of an emergent socioeconomic and educated class allied with more liberal values. In Cuba and other Latin American spaces, however, those who choose to write in costumbrismo's voice are not a new sector of society attempting to undo hierarchy; rather, they present a viable option for Latin Americans who are no longer "españoles de ultramar" but instead "cubanos," "mexicanos," "argentinos," etc. Their attempts to assert local control of their societies and politics, even when allied to the colonial power, parallel the position of bourgeois sectors in the face of monarchical, hierarchical structures. Within colonial and neocolonial societies, costumbrismo's often satirical or humorous critique offers the means by which to disagree with a repressive social order while at the same time passing itself off as "mere entertainment."

As I note above, costumbrismo's satire and humor criticize a specific social or political issue or personality, but as a genre, it is ideologically ambiguous. That is to say, writers of costumbrismo may occupy a great variety of ideological positions and express them through their use of the costumbrista genre, even though Cuban costumbrismo is charged with a strong anticolonial stance (Bueno xv). This is partly because, as suggested above, costumbrismo is largely a descriptive genre, which, along with the American appropriation of a genre developed elsewhere, accounts for the genre's polysemy. In its different manifestations, costumbrismo always carries a corrective charge: whether the view of society that it represents is conservative or radical, costumbrismo, more so than most narratives, postulates an "ought." In other words, by exalting or critiquing customs or social types, costumbrismo tries to ratify or correct the customs of a place. Undoubtedly,

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<sup>7</sup> See Gaspar Betancourt Cisnero's "Escenas cotidianas," which take their setting in Puerto Príncipe, and José María Cárdenas y Rodríguez's "Fisiología del administrador de un ingenio" as examples in *Costumbristas cubanos del siglo xix* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980).

this means that costumbrismo has a great deal of political importance, but costumbrismo will also communicate values, by which I mean that costumbrismo as a genre is always bound up with ethics. It is no wonder then that costumbrismo discovers for us that the potentiality and non-fixity of customs is parallel to the potentiality and non-fixity of ethics itself.

Through its emphasis on local characters or types and local spaces, costumbrismo is an expression of tradition, for even when costumbrismo aims to denounce a social practice, its target is clearly a socially defined and specific practice that is either historical or perceived as historical. I make a distinction between what is actually historical and what is perceived as historical because costumbrismo's narrative mode is, in effect, to represent social customs as always already traditional and historical. But the value, and value because of its alleged historicity, endemic to costumbrismo is that it provides a concrete narrative for a rootless social practice or cultural belief. If myth is the means by which civilizations begin to generate explanations for how the natural world functions, costumbrismo is the way by which civilizations begin to generate how the modern, social world functions and the means by which a foundational history based on social and community values emerges. But these values, as important as they may be, cannot be said to arise naturally from any specific historical experience. As I show in my analysis of *Sab*, costumbrismo's history is really a present-tense idealization of the past, independent from its facticity, in which a particular historical narrative is selected for its susceptibility for cooptation by sociocultural hegemonic forces. Costumbrismo, then, expresses the values and traditions that are important in the present, although these traditions are portrayed as historical. In this way, costumbrismo's "history" is really an imagined genealogy of the present and is ahistorical: in costumbrismo we see a postulation of social values, politics, and ethics, almost *suis generis*. Most importantly, this postulation occurs by and through aesthetics as the costumbrista texts are laden with thick descriptions of social types and spaces that are always already aesthetic.

What does it mean, then, that costumbrismo's historical claims are rootless while its spaces and characters are intimately tied to a particular place? One implication of this double bind is that the focus on values through the use of social types and the local to convey "universal" bourgeois or Enlightenment ideals questions the primacy of that local space or unique social type. For if the specificity of the local demonstrates the proximity to, or distance from, post-Enlightenment Eurocentric "universal" values, then the local is the granular example of an a priori truth formulated elsewhere—namely, in Europe: the local proves the hegemonic structure of post-Enlightenment universalism and not the fissures within this hegemony. In other words, costumbrismo's connection to a specific place but historical rootlessness means that the local may not be sufficient to mount a countervailing or alternative version of modernity to rival European modernity.

#### Costumbrismo's Myopia: The Limits of Costumbrista Description

Description's centrality in costumbrismo enriches and problematizes literary discourse when it enters the world of the novel. For if the novel as a genre seems obsessed

with detailing root causes and motivations, primarily through its deployment of character and plot, costumbrista description is ill equipped to deal with these root causes. Following Bakhtin's theorization of the novel, costumbrismo enters the novel as a genre with its own voice and language, forming a dialogical relationship with the other genres that generate the novel (Bakhtin 46-49). However, while Bakhtin generally posits this dialogical relationship as a positive or harmonious one, costumbrismo's position within the novel, while dialogical, enters into a relationship already marked by power. That is to say, different generic discourses in the novel do not enter a dialogue with an equal "footing." Indeed, they may enter into competition or struggle with each other. I would argue, in fact, that it is the asymmetry inherent in dialogism in general, and in the novel in particular, that marks many novels as exciting and fully immersive readerly experiences. In *Sab*, the text exhibits this asymmetrical dialogism through the interaction between costumbrismo and Romanticism as the novel stages encounters, through its descriptions of the land and social scenes, of these two powerful currents. The narrative's detailed descriptions of Cuba's autochthonous flowers, vegetation, and land—both as admirable landscape and subterranean mystery, as well as the scenes in which the characters interact, highlight the local character that is at the heart of costumbrismo. Likewise, the emphasis on the deep psychology of the three main characters (Sab, Carlota, and Teresa) and on their sensibility, taste, and oppression at the hands of slavery and patriarchy, respectively, represents a focus on subjectivity and inter-subjectivity closely connected to Romanticism. Yet what remains of this dialogism, particularly given the characters' fates, is undoubtedly the Romantic discourse of personal emancipation through radical subjectivity. While the novel manages to merge these discourses at the aesthetic level, their asymmetrical encounter ultimately shows the fallacy of a purely local, or national, stance that is simultaneously universal in nineteenth-century Cuba.

In *Sab*, the text paints a portrait of the manners of the decaying white criollo family and its explicit encounter, on one hand, with "el espíritu mercantil" of the global market, and its implicit encounter with the quagmire of slavery, on the other. The traditional order in *Sab* is already defunct,<sup>8</sup> yet Cuba is also in danger from the predations of the liberal market, as represented by Jorge and Enrique Otway. The encounter signaled above is at the heart and beginning of the novel, for it is with these two elements that the narrator introduces the reader to the story. Through a visual register, the first chapter places the first scene of encounter, between the mulatto Sab and the English Enrique Otway, in the "fertilísimo" Cuban countryside, amidst the purple and argentine skies of sunset and the "vigorosa y lozana vegetación" (39). Prefiguring the auto-ethnographic emphasis in Realist literature, Gómez de Avellaneda sets not a scene but *the* typical scene of the Cuban land as exuberant, lush, fecund, and vibrant. That is to say, this is a costumbrista scene as much as for its setting as for the social entities the characters represent. Nonetheless, this typical

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<sup>8</sup> The character Sab relates that the Bellavista ingenio no longer produces economic profit as it once did; the quantity of black slaves ("negros") and the quantity of sugar has decreased by half (42). Moreover, the narrator describes Don Carlos, the patriarch of the Bellavista ingenio, as "uno de aquellos hombres apacibles y perezosos que no saben hacer mal, ni tomarse grandes fatigas para efectuar el bien" (59).

scene, a commonplace encounter, between a rich young merchant and a mulatto slave, is represented as atypical, particularly because of the failures of reading this meeting signifies. For if costumbrismo's project is to make the local clearly identifiable by means of set scenes and character types, Romanticism depends upon a sustained reading practice that moves, in layers, from the exterior into the interior. However, both modes of reading, one allegedly transparent (costumbrismo) and the other dependent upon seeing and interpreting (Romanticism), short-circuit each other. This confrontation between literary styles does not "nullify" each aesthetic current but rather reveals the asynchronous modernity that obtain from costumbrismo and Romanticism in nineteenth-century Cuba.

The text's preoccupation with visual and physical description firmly underlines the novelistic project of reading and interpretation that undergirds this encounter, a project that relies heavily on the description of the custom sketch. A key term in this first chapter of the novel, which is repeated often throughout the text, is physiognomy: a reading practice that postulates an approximation of interior character through facial and physical characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Physiognomy as a means by which to interpret physical information through observation and sight is an important feature of late-eighteenth and nineteenth century epistemology.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Jonathan Crary points out in *Techniques of the Observer*, the historical moment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries features a transition from the camera obscura as a technology for understanding space and perspective to technologies of sight that highlight a subjective vision and a separation—and

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<sup>9</sup> In these early years of empiricism and protoscience, observation was often interpretive and essayistic in a way contemporary science is not. In the Republican United States, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for example, represents an attempt to show the ancient, sublime, and productive aspects of the North American continent. As Jefferson organizes American space through Enlightenment rationality, he parallels the physical features of the country with early American society and the Republic, and thus posits the production of a modern, agrarian, Republican space to rival the modern European polities. Similarly, Charles Darwin reads through rocks and specimens to generate an evolutionary history, as an alternative to a Biblical understanding of history, that revolutionizes time, historiography, and the place of the human in the life of the planet. Jefferson's and Darwin's efforts, along with writers like Edgar Allan Poe, whose "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," are only a tip of the iceberg on how physiognomy and reading the body—no longer just clothes and/or badges of office—are important avenues to knowledge in Western Europe, the United States, and Latin America.

<sup>10</sup> In *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Roberto González Echevarría dedicates his third chapter to argue for the rise and importance of scientific discourse in Latin America, both in the nonfiction essay and in the novel. Costumbrista writing is part of the ecology of this literate and literary world. It is clear that the modes of observation as well as the modes of writing becoming prominent in the early nineteenth century provided important conceptual and writing tools for writers. It should not be surprising, then, that costumbrista description will often resort to pseudo-scientific or cataloguing language in order to represent the uniqueness of the local reality, especially when the narrative's audience may not be familiar with that locality.

systemization—of the senses (72-73). In this transition, sight and visuality, as opposed to space, comes into being. Moreover, the seeing subject also becomes “a subject of new knowledge and new techniques of power”(79). But it also means that the observer, through physiology, becomes an empirical object of study. The observer comes under scrutiny as much as what she sees (81). In this light, physiognomy, as a pseudo-scientific step-cousin of physiology, occupies a significant place in literary and artistic production because it relies on a subjective interpretation of the empirical. In some ways, physiognomy resists the empiricism of physiology, though its subjective products—the attribution of character traits based upon physical attributes—were often abused by tautological interpretations that confirmed, rather than tested, received notions of different kinds of people. Slaveocratic regimes in particular abused physiognomy and other potentially ideologically neutral pseudo-sciences to clothe economic and social relations with a veneer of rationality. In *Sab*, of course, the text will interrogate physiognomy itself. The first postulation, despite the fact that Enrique and Sab are so attractive—or perhaps because of it, is that the subject’s interiority cannot truly be discovered by external matters. Of course, this is a cliché, for what is more trite than “don’t judge a book by its cover”? But, like Jane Austen’s repetitive marriage plots, the cliché is not the end of the story but the beginning: for what the cliché announces is the dangers of an uncritical adoption of an axiom. Indeed, this cliché suggests how untenable it is to generate national feeling, much less a nation-state, out of the unpacked, received traditions costumbrismo draws upon; Gómez de Avellaneda alerts us to the fact that the temptation of costumbrismo is the end of thinking. That is, costumbrismo entails an uncritical application of values or beliefs that are allegedly permanent to ever-changing social, economic, and cultural factors.

Why tie together costumbrismo in this novel with something as ominous as “the end of thinking”? The representation of customs in the narrative suggests formulaic thinking, a kind of thinking that is reactive rather than active (or critical). *Sab* is as much a novel of Cuban customs as it is an antislavery novel, which initially appears to be groundbreaking. This is especially so because, through the character of the mulatto slave Sab, the novel effectively demonstrates the impenetrability of subjectivity given the character’s interior motivations and the inability of those around him to read or interpret him sagaciously. As a character, Sab emerges very quickly as a model subject and natural leader for Cuba, given his vast experience and knowledge with the land and its people. Indeed, much of what the novel decries is how much better off this fictional Cuba would be if led by Sab. But the insistence on this negative logic, on highlighting what *ought not be*, is problematic if this is the endpoint of the novelistic project, for such a “lesson,” as admirable as it might be, is powerfully banal. Remaining at this level of signification would mean applying formulaic thinking, which as Adorno and Horkheimer point out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is a hallmark of the modern but also a betrayal of enlightenment principles.

More importantly, while *Sab* advocates against slavery and the emancipation of women from a patriarchal order,<sup>11</sup> it does so through a costumbrista lens, adopting this

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Davies argues, in the aforementioned “On Englishmen, Women, Indians, and Slaves: Modernity in the Nineteenth-century Spanish-American Novel,” that the only

genre for its grander purposes. Yet women's abolitionist literature in the nineteenth century, namely Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs (whose most important works postdate the publication of *Sab*), relies on the centrality of sentiment for Romantic novelistic production. The underlying assumption of sentimentality is that appealing to a reader's sensibilities will allow her to question the strictures of the society she is embedded in; for sentimentalists, emotion works in tandem with rationality, enhancing the subject's aesthetic experience as well as her critical faculties. *Sab* is certainly part of this "American" tradition of a sentimental antislavery literature, as Catherine Davies and Nina Scott point out in their respective introductions to the novel (Davies 14-20; Scott xviii, xxii-xiv). However, the commonality and transcendence of the individual to arrive at general values that sentimentality presupposes is at odds with costumbrismo, since costumbrismo is primarily a genre that deals with the local and the primacy of local custom. Thus, the axiom of not judging a book by its cover underlines the impossibility of sentiment itself as a means to overcome historically specific social and cultural differences and hierarchies. Even when costumbrismo is corrective, as mentioned above, it is also about discovering and preserving social and cultural values, not general ones. By merging the specificity of the custom sketch with the (over)generality of sentiment, Gómez de Avellaneda suggests that the preserving function of costumbrismo works in tandem with the end of thinking. The conservation inherent to the costumbrista form produces a myopic image that closes itself off from the multiplicity of perspectives that is required for both the specificity of the local and the swarm of the universal.

In order to alert the reader to the preserving function of costumbrismo and to the possible dulling of her critical faculties, the novel's omniscient narrator provides the reader with a "true account" of what happens in the text. The novel begins by placing the reader as an idealized spectator<sup>12</sup> of a Cuban panorama of the "campos pintorescos que riega el

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triumph in *Sab* is achieved by Teresa, the dependent of the Bellavista ingenio and Sab's double. Davies suggests that Teresa emerges as a true modern subject who, though in isolation in the convent of the Ursulinas, as she is the only who takes it upon herself to actively change her condition and enjoys some measure of happiness (329).

<sup>12</sup> In its deployment of these characters studying each other in full "view" of the reader, the text recreates a scene of gazing that outline the modern view of the gaze as theorized by Lacan (and Merleau-Ponty). According to Stephen Melville, in "Division of the Gaze, or, Remarks on the Color and Tenor of Contemporary "Theory,"" visuality emerges in Lacan, through an engagement with Merleau-Ponty, as essentially enigmatic, and that its challenge is to stay within its "duplicity" rather than trying to get "behind it" (109). By "duplicity," Melville refers to being both the subject and object of the gaze. Peter de Bolla, in "The Visibility of Visuality," also comments on the emergence of visuality. His analysis focuses on late eighteenth-century England, but he triangulates Lacan's ideas on the gaze with Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and a scandal in Vauxhall Gardens. Aside from the obvious relevance of Smith's text to sentimentalism, de Bolla comments on how Smith's sentimentalism is based upon an ethics based upon vision: seeing and being seen—and, most importantly, imagining an impartial spectator witnessing one's own actions. The kind of dramatic irony Gómez de Avellaneda sets in motion in this text suggests the importance

Tínima [river]" as they are traversed by a "joven of hermosa presencia" on horseback (38). Specifically, this young rider is about three leagues from the village of Cubitas and four leagues from the provincial capital Puerto Príncipe (present-day Camagüey). The narrator comments that whether because of his unfamiliarity with the place or for his enjoyment, the rider slows his travels, often stopping to admire the scenery of the "campos fertilísimos" of the country (39). In the midst of this rural scene and seeming contemplation of the land, the riding "joven of hermosa presencia," Enrique Otway, meets a figure walking through this picture whose social station seems curiously mysterious to the rider, especially since the narrator straightforwardly relates who and what this second man is: Sab, a mulatto and slave, facts that escape Enrique entirely until Sab himself has to correct him.

Even before his name is introduced, the reader learns that Enrique is foreign born, as his blond hair marks him as someone who "había venido al mundo en una región del Norte" (39). Indeed, the narrator assumes that as a foreigner the land of Cuba, "aquel país privilegiado," should have a "mayor atractivo para él" (39). Likewise, it is clear that Sab, the man who is walking and Enrique meets, has "una fisonomía particular...Su rostro presentaba un compuesto singular en que se descubría el cruzamiento de dos razas diversas, y en que se amalgamaban, por decirlo así, los rasgos de la casta africana con los de la europea, sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto" (40). Here, as throughout the text, the narrator refers in earnest to physiognomy to point out what knowledge may be gained through a careful exploration of the body itself, particularly Sab and Enrique's faces, for each description provides information of each other not only of who they are but of their ancestry.

This reference to ancestry puts us firmly in a complicated field of national, colonial, and racial relations. For the narrator recounts Jorge Otway's origins in England, his migration to the United States as a peddler, which eventually leads to his settlement in Cuba first as a peddler and later as a rich merchant (55). Likewise, Enrique's upbringing in Cuba but education in England (55) also point to the flow of persons and capital operating in the background of *Sab* and Cuba's social world. Sab's own provenance, as the son of an enslaved African princess and, the Bellavista family believes, a wealthy white criollo in colonial Cuba (45), also shows the movement of persons and capital for which Cuba was an important epicenter in the Americas. Moreover, Sab's mixed racial and social (slave-landowner) heritage highlight not only race and slavery, but also the Cuban linkage in the nineteenth century between blackness and slavery, a linkage that is analogous to racial slavery in Brazil and the United States at the time. It is this last dynamic that the novel attempts to emphasize, particularly in this first encounter between the merchant white foreigner and the mulatto slave. This inaugural meeting between these two characters initiates an explicit comparison between the two of them that entails an attempt to dismantle contemporaneous notions of race. Through the language of physiognomy, Gómez

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of costumbrismo to focus our attention upon an image but also how costumbrismo itself becomes an object of study and the demands placed upon readers as "impartial" or idealized spectators.



de Avellaneda engages the pseudo-scientific discourse of reading the body and, thus, begins to dismantle race by tackling biological or essentialist approaches to race.

The direct introduction of the language of physiognomy highlights received essentialist ideas about race. Yet Gómez de Avellaneda also points out that reading bodies, even while this kind of reading is ostensibly supported by an essentialist interpretive practice, is always already a part of socially mediated encounters. Sab and Enrique's meeting is singular since "ambos se miraron un momento antes de hablar" (40). The characters appraise each other for a few moments before they speak, thus maintaining this meeting in a reciprocally visual mode as both characters attempt to read each other through sight even before they speak. While the use of a reflexive verb, "se miraron," does not entail the abolition of hierarchy, it does construct both characters as observers and observed. In this reciprocal action, what emerges is a silent appraisal, an attempt to understand, at the very least, the other's social status if not his worth.

This mutual measuring of each other begins, tellingly, with a pause pregnant in aesthetic ruminations. To be sure, both characters are visually striking, exemplars of two very different kinds of masculinity. Indeed, Enrique's good looks generate "una suspensión" (40) in Sab. This "suspensión" is quite a bit more than an English "pause": certainly a pause occurs, as I note above, but it happens because Sab is taken up with Enrique's blond, blue-eyed looks. What Sab experiences is that kind of marvel first experienced by Columbus upon first seeing Cuba: a kind of affective and cognitive shock, the sublime, that occurs not only as a result of the object's singularity but also as a response to the strangeness of the object within its context. Unlike Columbus, however, Sab is immediately aware of the relational aspects of this meeting, for as vulgar as rush judgments based on appearances may be, their larger contours do communicate certain facts. In this case, Enrique's whiteness and foreign looks mean that he is neither slave nor peasant but likely a part of Cuba's upper class. In other words, if Columbus' mastery of the marvel of discovery only comes about through a later rhetorical intervention, Sab cognitively apprehends the marvel *in the moment*. Even before the text provides evidence for Sab's inherent stewardship of Cuba and Carlota, Gómez de Avellaneda represents as being able to penetrate even unto the foreign.

But if in this initial moment it is Sab who admires Enrique, the narrator states that in Sab's body "[se] formaba una fisonomía característica; una de aquellas fisonomías que fijan las miradas a primera vista y que jamás se olvidan cuando se han visto una vez" (40-41). For all the strangeness and beauty of Enrique's visage, it is the emergence of Sab's facial features, his skin tone, his race, and his physiognomy that are undeniably foregrounded, so much so that Sab is remarkably unforgettable: once someone sees him, Sab will never be forgotten. In describing Sab's reaction to Enrique's physical appearance, the narrator represents how a subject reacts to beauty. But this reaction prepares the reader to not only react but also understand Sab: the narrator begins describing Sab as an interesting object *and* subject. This is how the narrator attempts to educate the reader to approach Sab and Cuba, to look beyond the titillating and sensual pleasures of the exterior

and the deep mystery of its interior. But this is not an enigma that defies comprehension but rather the enigma of subjectivity itself.

### Dialogical Mitigations: Dialogue's Supplementation of Visuality as Costumbrismo's Corrective

It is telling that the narrator notes that all this observation and interpretation happens before they speak, for it shows the importance of the visual register in the generation of meaning and knowledge. As the normatively constructed "first fact" of the encounter, sight is often understood as an unmediated sense, yet this scene reveals that sight alone provokes a great deal of knowledge and interpretations. But this knowledge and attendant interpretations emerge out of the mediation of sight with other sense impressions, previous experience, and other intra-psychic and social factors, which means they can always be wrong. Indeed, what may emerge in the absence of words, as it does in Enrique's case, is a web of projections based on previous knowledge that may vary greatly from the "reality" at hand. This variance is intensified when this previous knowledge is acted on as if it were an undisputed fact, as Enrique does once dialogue begins. The introduction of dialogue unmasks the great variance between "reality" and a reading of this reality based only on visual understanding and interpretation drawing on previous experience. It would be very easy indeed to remain at the surface level with Sab, at the first fact of his racialized description as a "rostro que presentaba un compuesto singular en que se descubriría el cruzamiento de dos razas diversas...los rasgos de la casta africana con los de la europea, sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto" (40). Interestingly, Sab is not a "mulato perfecto," not strictly the brown one might expect from the mixture of an African princess and a rich criollo: his skin is "un blanco amarillento con cierto fondo oscuro;...su nariz era aguileña pero sus labios gruesos y amoratados denotaban su procedencia africana" (40). This physical description purports, as it were, to explain who Sab is. Though present, especially in the background or "fondo," Sab's African heritage takes a back seat to his criollo ancestry. To many nineteenth century readers, the emphasis on this imperfect mixture in which the criollo predominates conveys that Sab's worth as a subject is far greater than being a product of miscegenation might suggest.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as the novel develops, this foreshadowing of Sab's exceptionality is confirmed. But this confirmation occurs, first of all, through dialogue, namely Sab's own voice.

Gómez de Avellaneda quickly supplements what is observable with what is not through Sab's own insights regarding the surrounding plantation, the question of slavery, and his own social and racial provenance. As I mention above, Sab and Enrique's encounter in the proximities of the Bellavista ingenio seems like a typical chance encounter. However,

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<sup>13</sup> Sab's description has produced much critical writing. Doris Sommer argues in the fourth chapter of *Foundational Fictions*, "Sab C'est Moi," that this description is indeterminate, which certainly seems accurate, but she casts both Enrique and the reader as blinded by this indeterminacy (118). Since the novel quickly supplies the reader with the certainty of Sab's provenance, through his own voice and its corroboration by other characters, I maintain that the faulty reading here is performed by Enrique, not the reader.

faced with only visual information, Enrique interprets Sab as a walking “paisano” and waits for him in order to obtain information regarding Carlota’s lands (Enrique is a consummate researcher, ready to see riches and ascertain their value for himself, particularly through the use of gossip). If, like the countryside, this encounter between these two men does not seem strange, particularly at this moment in the narration, its signifying puzzles become quite evident as soon as Enrique opens his mouth and interprets Sab’s features and dress as that of a peasant worker (41). Indeed, Enrique uses the formal “Ud.” to address Sab. Though it is not a foregone conclusion that Enrique should immediately treat Sab as an inferior, and the use of “Ud.” is appropriate for the encounters between strangers, Enrique’s politeness is curious if indeed he is addressing a peasant on foot while he is on horseback. The scene provides a depiction of the social situation at work, yet Enrique is curiously out of joint with it. Why? A couple of pages earlier, the narrator introduces Enrique as a lone rider who stops often to admire the fertile Cuban countryside (39). Enrique’s admiration here could mean at least two things: a kind of reverie at the beauty of the countryside or an economic appraisal of how that countryside may be used. The former attitude entails receiving, through sight, the land before him; the latter attitude implies a projection onto the land for the rider’s benefit. As corroborated later by his and his father’s “espíritu mercantil,” Enrique is appraising the land and projecting his wishes upon it. In his encounter with Sab, Enrique projects his own perspective onto the scene rather than reading it, rather than accepting what is before him. Though a foreigner, and perhaps even more poignantly because of it, Enrique’s projective reading practice shows the limitations of formulaic thinking, of interpreting history, tradition, and social customs according to received notions. These are the dangers of costumbrismo: understanding social reality based on schematic thinking that takes contemporary social customs as evidence of a deep historicity—and authority—that may indeed be rootless.

The narrator and Enrique’s representations of the scene clash, scrambling the costumbrista scene and, importantly, the very configuration of the characters’ relationships to each other. In so doing, Gómez de Avellaneda discovers for the reader the dangers of projective reading practices based on received notions that, in the hands of the powerful, threaten to warp reality. In this instance, it is Sab’s voice that must correctly interpret for Enrique the scene that they are in, the social relations between the two of them. Responding to Enrique’s query regarding the productivity of the land and the number of slaves at the ingenio, Sab answers with the necessary information but also makes an impassioned denunciation, if not against the practice then the ontology, of slavery: “es un cruel espectáculo la vista de la humanidad degradada, de hombres convertidos en brutos, que llevan en su frente la marca de la esclavitud y en su alma la desesperación del infierno” (43). Sab’s denunciation is a loaded one, for it signals more than hatred toward “hombres convertidos en brutos.” Here Sab is offering what seems to be the number one dictum of the Romantic abolitionist: to assert the universality and intersubjectivity of humanity itself. Sab does not need Cornell West to tell him that racism and slavery are about a misapprehension of what is human at its most fundamental philosophical level. In making this remark, Sab is not only denouncing slavery, but also announcing himself as a slave. And Enrique fails to recognize the latter communication altogether. From the narrator’s physical description, it is clear that Sab is a mulatto, though whether he is a slave or not is

in question. His status as a slave becomes more apparent, however, as Sab mentions how slaves must labor under the sun, which “tuesta [sus] cutis,” and thus the brown of the mulatto comes into his discourse regarding slavery. Moreover, though race and slavery are not necessarily mutually exclusive, Sab makes it clear that they are, more often than not, paired when he states that slaves “llevan en su frente la marca de la esclavitud.”

I am not arguing, particularly as slavery and race are *not* mutually exclusive in nineteenth-century Cuba, that Enrique’s failure is one of generalizing. His failure is that, instead of registering what he is seeing and hearing, he interprets Sab’s speech and redraws the scene, creating, of all things, a Cuban pastoral: as a response to Sab’s opprobrium of slavery, Enrique says, “Presumo que tengo el gusto de estar hablando con algún distinguido propietario de estas cercanías. No ignoro que los criollos cuando están en sus haciendas de campo, gustan vestirse como simples labriegos” (43). It is almost as if the text is citing *Don Quijote*, but instead of finding lovelorn noble youths playacting as shepherds and shepherdesses, Enrique imagines rich criollos amidst a new Arcadia, Cuba, enjoying a bare existence as “simples labriegos.” Or, better yet, Wordsworth’s English Romanticism is radically *misapplied* to a new land or context, since the communion between the individual and nature postulated in *The Prelude* rests on a conception of the English land and the English subject as, ostensibly, free. But here Cuba, as a colony, and Sab, as a slave, renders this projection as impossible—indeed, ridiculous.

As a sign for the foreign, specifically the English capitalist interest in exploiting Cuba and complicating its colonial relationship to Spain, it might seem reasonable that Enrique makes the kind of interpretive mistake that reframes Cuba and its people according to his own background. But though educated outside of Cuba, Enrique has lived most of his life in Cuba (Gómez de Avellaneda 55); proximity to and understanding these kinds of encounters must be a part of the every day life of the character. Through Enrique’s construction of a pastoral scene, the text acknowledges the costumbrista features of its aesthetic project: on the one hand, the “pastoral” he constructs is an idyllic portrait of the Cuban countryside proper to costumbrismo; on the other hand, even though Enrique is hardly a stranger to Cuba, he cannot exceed the representability of his character as a type rather than an individual. That is, both Enrique and his father are represented as flat characters that stand in for a general principle, the kind of character type that costumbrismo trades in. In this case, the type being represented is an English, unscrupulous merchant, who transforms everything he sees into exchange value and is not worthy of the kind of romantic love Carlota has for him or the kind of stewardship that the country requires. Because Enrique is such a character type, largely unwilling or unable to transcend his own limited perspective, he is proof of how dangerous the formulas of costumbrismo can be. So that the beauty and social experiences that costumbrismo offers are complicated by the formulaic, reductive notions it propagates. The text once again suggests that a “straight” reading of costumbrismo in the novel might result in a signifying disaster: represented as spiritually empty and morally weak, Enrique’s fate is to marry Carlota, become more successful, and to attempt to turn Cuba, Carlota, and himself into pure object, into pure exchange. Enrique’s fate is almost a “happy ending”—the only one in the novel, but this “happy ending” is exactly the catastrophe the text finds most alarming.

I am not arguing that dialogue always or even usually functions as a kind of corrective to description or other forms of narration. Indeed, as a broad theoretical point, I would argue that dialogue may enter into a dialogical relationship with other aspects of narration in ways that may supplement narration, sometimes replacing and other times adding to narration. From my perspective, it seems that all the discreet aspects of narration, while dialogically embedded, may always already be in contention with each other to establish their own unique primacy in the generation of meaning. However, it seems clear that in *Sab* the representation of speech seems to fill in the interpretative gaps that the visual register of costumbrista description seems to leave wide open.

### Universalism in and against the Slave Body

My analysis must now “encounter” the primary dictum of Romantic abolitionism that I remark upon above: what is the relationship between a universalist notion of humanity that serves as a motor for emancipation and an attack on the universalist tendencies of capital and rights that may be able to turn subjects into objects (i.e., make them indiscriminately exchangeable)? The costumbrismo of the novel shows that universalism in the colonial context is, in fact, capaciously oppressive. Indeed, I would argue that the kind of antislavery universalism that this sentimental novel offers is really a kind of ethic, a notion of the good that has, however, no real politics with which to work in tandem. This lack of politics seems to be endemic to both sentimentalist and Romantic aesthetics that activate costumbrismo: the novel does not offer a politics because it does not know, fundamentally, politics. What the novel does know, but does not produce as a politics or practice to actuate its ethics, is the potentiality of revolutionary action, which nevertheless is no real politics. Sab’s textual flirtations with becoming a revolutionary leader, especially in his meeting with Teresa in the sugarcane fields (130-151), and his almost immediate closing of that possibility show that, unlike Haiti, there will be no slave revolution in Cuba. Or at least there will be none executed by Sab. The text’s disclosure of this inert potential clearly points to the viability of revolution, though as a specter, but there is no political program that could emerge from Sab himself. For, aside from the emancipation of slaves and later the “emancipation” of women from the patriarchal system, Sab provides no clear view of politics. As an exemplar of Romantic subjectivity, he champions his individuality in ways that would necessitate a liberal state to guarantee his radical subjective freedom. But neither in Spain nor in Cuba, during the era in which the novel is set (on or about 1818 (Davies 20)) and that of its publication (1841), could anyone successfully enact such a thing as a liberal politics. It could barely be theorized, but really only in Spain where the struggle between liberals and Carlistas raged since at least the Cortes de Cádiz in 1812. It is also worthwhile to look at what is produced through Sab’s radical Romantic subjectivity: his own destruction and, by extension, the destruction of all main characters in the novel save for Enrique. While his death can be read as an expression of a true Romantic self, of a sensibility and spirit that transcends mere life, it also entails a removal from society and from responsibility to the community. This point is important since the novel itself, quite explicitly, voices an antislavery project that by definition must

include a social dimension: after all, what good is freedom of mind and spirit if the body is still in bondage?<sup>14</sup>

The potentiality that could lead to revolution but not a politics per se manifests itself through Sab's body, particularly his eyes and the protection-surveillance that derives from them. Readers are first alerted to the ambiguity and potential for violence through Sab's eyes and the ways the narrator describes them. Unlike Enrique, who misinterprets who Sab is and has to be corrected by Sab, Sab correctly recognizes that the blond stranger is Enrique Otway, Carlota's intended. As he realizes who the stranger is, the narrator focuses on Sab's eyes: "Cubrióse su frente de arrugas verticales, lanzaron sus ojos un resplandor siniestro, como la luz del relámpago que brilla entre nubes oscuras" (47). As if his glowing eyes were not already sinister enough, the narrator underlines the emotion behind Sab's reaction through the extended metaphor of a lightning bolt amidst dark clouds. Though the narrator generally represents Sab as a sympathetic character, because an exceptional Romantic subject, the narrator uses Sab's roving eyes to mark time and again the potential for violence in Sab. Such is the case in the novel's notorious garden scene, in which the narrator portrays yet another self-deconstructive costumbrista scene like the meeting between Enrique and Sab at the beginning of the novel. After learning that her intended, Enrique, has survived an accident during the previous night's storm—an accident from which Sab rescues him, but not after he considers killing Enrique, Carlota wakes early the next morning to feed the plantation's birds. She starts by feeding the doves and chickens and later the peacock and swans (76-77). She finishes by playing in a criollo garden; crafted by Sab, "no dominaba el gusto inglés ni el francés en aquel lindo jardinillo: Sab no había consultado sino sus caprichos al formarle" (77). The garden is composed of a great variety of flowers, but especially Cuban flowers, for which the writer must include a detailed description in the text's footnotes to explain for non-Cuban readers what they are (78). At the center of this scene, of course, are these autochthonous flowers (la clavellina, la malvarosa, la pasionaria), which, together with the early-morning feeding of the poultry and birds, suggest the traditional, presentist feature of representing customs. Indeed, it is this kind of scene that paints everyday life, whether it has a positive or negative valence, that demonstrates how representing customs is about narrating the present, even though this representation of the present will warp time itself as it is so forceful as to be considered *permanent*. That means that these narrated present moments seem to suggest what everyday life was and is.<sup>15</sup> Depending on the narrative trajectory, the narrated presentness

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<sup>14</sup> A counterintuitive example from the United States might be Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* in which Jacobs states that, after escaping from slavery, she prefers the sensation of being buried alive inside a garret for almost seven years to freedom of movement as a slave (46-147). Jacobs is keen, though, to note that while she is stuck in the garret and tormented by the sight of her children, whom she cannot talk to or mother, she engages in a game of wits with her master through writing, often inducing him to take expensive trips to the north in futile efforts to capture her.

<sup>15</sup> I take up this question of the relationship between how social customs interact with the past and the present in my fourth chapter on Machado de Assis' *Quincas Borba*, "Reconciling and Emending Brazilian Manners in *Quincas Borba*."

of customs may suggest how everyday life will be (preservation) and what it ought to be (correction).

In this garden scene, much of what is described may be read as what ought to be for a variety of reasons. The authenticity of the garden is in no small way cemented by the hand that created it, Sab's, for even though he is a great reader, his own sense of taste, not English or French theories of gardening, are the inspiration for the garden's composition. What Sab is able to do here, reshaping nature to his taste and for the pleasure of the Cuban Romantic heroine, demonstrates his utmost fitness to be not a master but a steward of Cuba and its traditions. In other words, what Jefferson attempts to do through reason in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Sab can do through his taste and superior spirit. He is also able to intuit what will please Carlota and can do through deed what he cannot do through language: communicate his love. But the present, specifically Sab's present condition as a slave, interrupts this "ought." Despite Sab's adeptness and constitutional and spiritual connection to Cuba and Carlota, the customary nature of the scene is at question in at least two levels. First, though the kinds of birds at the Bellavista ingenio are surely included to signify wealth and aristocracy, a peacock and swans in a Cuban estate seem slightly bizarre. What is the role of these signs of European status markers in this country scene? Moreover, what exactly is Carlota doing feeding chickens? What, are there no maids here? I do not question the plausibility of these birds having been part of the excesses of a criollo family's country estate. But the question remains as to how this kind of excess is to survive both the continuation of the dismal regime of slavery or the transcendence of such a regime. For are we to imagine that in a utopian version of the novel, Sab and Carlota would live in this ingenio among their now-freed slaves and enthusiastically feed the peacock as a pastime? As with Sab's and Enrique's first encounter, the typical nature of the scene misinterprets the dynamic at hand: the surface details themselves alert us to the strangeness of the moment.

The incongruence in this garden scene is parallel to the ambiguity of potential in Sab's eyes. By its very definition, potential has a neutral valence; when actuated, potential can transform into actions that may have positive or negative implications. As an exceptional case, Sab has the potential to lead a modern Cuban space or to initiate a slave revolt, and this ambiguity is most prominent in the language about his eyes. And it is in this scene itself where Sab's eyes are not described but felt, interestingly through sound: Carlota first hears footsteps that she cannot identify (78) and her fantasy of freeing the slaves and living in a hut with Enrique is disturbed because "estremeciéronse los pitos, como si una mano robusta los hubiese sacudido y Carlota asustada salió del jardín y se encaminó precipitadamente hacia la casa" (80). The sound and movement of the reeds are the novel's representation of Sab secretly watching Carlota, his love object. Sound here discloses a tangibility that vision elides,<sup>16</sup> bringing Carlota to reality and returning her from

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Melville comments that Merleau-Ponty argues that "vision is the place where our continuity with the world conceals itself, the place where we mistake our contact for distance, imagining that seeing is a substitute for, rather than a mode of, touching—and it is this anesthesia...that demands our acknowledgement..." (109). What seems most

her romantic fantasies. But it also alarms her. Carlota understands there is a hidden presence somewhere around her. That presence is Sab, who is almost stalking her in this scene. It is as if he had constructed the perfect habitat, the garden, from which to watch her and take on the role of the voyeur. Given the overdetermined quality of the text, readers understand that Sab is not really dangerous to Carlota; this is not going to be a Thomas Hardy novel where an aristocrat spies a beautiful peasant and has his way with her. But what the text reveals time and again is the problem of the potentiality in Sab, how sinister his eyes can be as well as his “protection” of Carlota. If Sab literalizes the figure of the slave of love of both medieval and Romantic tales, his deep subjectivity as a slave constitutes an amalgam whose end product is in doubt. In other words, as alluring as the notion of creating a garden for Carlota’s pleasure is, the intersubjective link between these two characters is only really understood by Sab himself who can choose to exploit it for his own benefit but does not. Again, this is why Sab is a hero, which does not mean that there is not always a potential here for things to go very wrong. Thus, the costumbrista sketch of a woman playing in her garden, describing a “simple” everyday scene of Cuban femininity and fecundity, is brought into relief by intimations of menace that literally frame her (by Sab’s landscaping and his watchful eyes). It is not only Enrique’s economic interests that may endanger Carlota; the darker side of Sab’s Romanticism may also put her at risk. In other words, the costumbrista scene reveals that Carlota may be hemmed in by both the universalism of the foreign and the oppressive tradition of the local.

### Wrestling the Hero’s Interiority

The juxtaposition of Sab’s Romantic sensibilities and his placement in costumbrista scenes shows how this kind of radical subjectivity and costumbrismo are theoretical anathema. Gómez de Avellaneda’s skills are in making these radically at odds narrative modes meaningfully cohere. But Sab’s potential for violence, an issue the text suggests but always skirts, is evidence of the struggle between Romanticism and costumbrismo in the novel. That Sab never produces violence shows how Gómez de Avellaneda seeks to maintain the tension between these two literary modes within the novel and prevents any kind of easy resolution. Sab abounds with the aptitude, knowledge, and strength to be an exceptional steward for the Bellavista ingenio and family—and by extension, Cuba. But, even though he does not want it, the potential for violence is always there, if not manifested. Certainly readers glimpse this potential for violence during the storm and accident that almost kill Enrique (70-73). But what the narrator is conveying Sab’s qualities through mimesis rather than diegesis: Sab’s seemingly lengthy fantasy of either Enrique dying or him killing Enrique represents the heroic subject’s facing a choice in which he chooses against his own benefit and does not kill his rival. The possibility of violence depicted in this storm scene is representative of how Sab’s unique nobility can master human baseness. But this form of mastery also means a capitulation of the local, for the Romantic sensibility Sab champions in choosing to act against his own interests entails an

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important here is that as sound suggests motion (touching) and displaces vision, these sensations, as represented in the text, are continuous. The effect is not anesthetic but synesthetic.



unwillingness not to champion costumbrismo but to generate new customs. As a prototypical Cuban hero, his potential to meld both Romanticism and costumbrismo to ostensibly create something new, a local Romanticism or a flexible costumbrismo that would allow for the representation of a new kind of interiority, is his real claim to exceptionality. But this kind of new subjectivity would necessitate the constitution of Sab's subjectivity as a true mixture and not a suspension of tensions. By extension, this new kind of subjectivity might be able to produce a movement that moves beyond ethics and revolution and enters fully the realm of politics.

While most scenes of potential violence subtend the reading of Sab's character as intrinsically noble, some cannot so easily be interpreted as Romantic subject formation. Two other scenes, in particular, generate more questions than answers. In the village of Cubitas, as Carlota, her family, and Enrique sleep, Sab sleeps just outside of Carlota's room. At least, so it seems, for the narrator only describes a "bulto que era un hombre" that moves each time there is an unusual sound in the night (104). Upon hearing steps approaching Carlota's room, however, this shape "se estremeció profundamente y brilló en la oscuridad la hoja de un ancho machete" (104). The steps are the dog's, who we later learn is called Leal, not Enrique attempting to satisfy his "inícuos deseos" (104) as Sab, and probably readers, surmise. This moment is an interesting, purely novelistic moment designed to keep readers' attention on the plot, on titillating them with that not unwelcome readerly question "what's going to happen next???" But its remainder is that "hoja de un ancho machete" that shines in the darkness, apparently illuminated by nothing. Here is the after-echo of Sab's interpretive "resplandor siniestro" from chapter one leaving now a much more unsettling notion of who Sab is and of what he is capable. If Sab is able to debate himself during the storm and stay his own hand, it seems that in this moment, if it were Enrique, there would be no hesitation. Indeed, such an action would entail a rewriting of costumbrismo through paranoia and prefigure dictatorship: the immediacy of violence and the safeguarding of the local, as represented by Carlota's sexuality, from a foreigner hints at a nationalist isolationism more familiar to twentieth-century Cuban history.

As Romantics go, however, why shouldn't Sab want to completely eradicate Enrique? It seems perfectly reasonable, though if that were the case all he would have to do is refrain from acting rather than doing anything. For Sab rescues Enrique at least two times (in the storm, while exploring the caves in Cubitas) and then, in attempting to secure Carlota's happiness, gives Enrique his own fortune won from the lottery, which is what Enrique and his father really care about. But what becomes clear is that Sab's potential for violence goes far beyond a Romantic hero's subject formation or even a "reasonable" irruption of irrationality to secure the love object. Sab's violent impulses are reminiscent of revolutionary impulses. But because of their immediacy, rootlessness, and complete lack of goals or program, they are not—and do not seem to be able to produce—politics. They are impulses that Sab succeeds in dominating for the entire novel precisely because neither he nor the narrator postulates a political moment after any revolutionary event. Until, that is, he can no longer dominate these impulses and redirects them back on himself, causing his heart to burst within his chest.

## Costumbrismo, Myth, and Apolitical Ethics

By paralleling the costumbrista scenes and motifs with Sab's eyes and body, I am arguing that the novel repeatedly puts together the conditions of *impossibility* for reading costumbrismo and the slave, mulatto body. The constant use of physiognomy to accurately understand character in the text ultimately becomes suspect, for such a style of reading entails a stable, universal method for reading the body. Through physiognomy, the text suggests that this kind of essentialist reading is possible, yet society interferes with a true reading. This is the corrective that Sab offers during his prolonged conversation with Teresa, an orphan and dependent in the Bellavista ingenio who also functions as Sab's female double, at the beginning of part two of the novel. Upon recognizing each other as loving those who they cannot hope to marry (Carlota for Sab, Enrique for Teresa) (90-91), Sab and Teresa meet in the sugarcane fields to discuss their parallel predicament. During this conversation, Sab first reveals how he once cursed nature for making him inferior to whites but now realizes that the cause of his condition as slave is a social one, not a natural one: "la sociedad de los hombres no ha imitado la equidad de la madre común, que en vano les ha dicho: ¡sois hermanos! ¡Imbécil sociedad, que nos ha reducido a la necesidad de aborrecerla, y fundar nuestra dicha en su total ruina!" (133). On the one hand, the narrator offers the proto-scientific language of physiognomy in order to introduce readers to the subjectivity of the protagonist, Sab, much in the same way in which nature and the landscape are offered as a means of understanding Cuba's extra-economic value. Yet Sab himself points out that such an effort is inevitably disrupted by society itself. Indeed, as Teresa alarmingly points out, it is as if Sab were calling for the destruction of society in order to restore the equality of nature and renounce the inequality man makes.

This question of the "equality" of nature and the inequality inherent in human relations are always already questioned by the text as a whole. For this notion of "natural" equality is presented as a Romantic affectation, particularly as Carlota conceives it. In the garden scene I discuss above, the sound of the reeds' movement seems to be Sab's reaction to Carlota's discourse upon slavery after greeting the slaves going to work in the fields: once married to Enrique, she hopes to "[dar] libertad a todos nuestros negros...Una choza con Enrique es bastante para [ella], y para él no habrá riqueza preferible a mi gratitud y amor" (80). Notwithstanding her blindness of Enrique's true character, Carlota postulates the slaves' freedom and imagines herself in a humble hut. In some ways, it is as if she wished to collapse time and return to a mythic time before the Conquest and the colony, a pre-lapsarian time in which she and Enrique are in tune with nature. This is a presentist notion of history, a wish to instantiate a world in which "natural law" and "equality" permeate the environment and secure individual freedoms.

But the novel usually short-circuits this kind of approach to both emancipation and time, often by interjecting history in the midst of a costumbrista scene. The characters' trip to the village of Cubitas functions as an almost archaeological tour of Cuba during this trip. The characters seem to go back in time through tradition, but instead of finding the plenitude of the past, they encounter history. That is, the positive valence of tradition that costumbrismo posits implies a projected plenitude onto the past that rivals myth. If, as

Doris Sommer argues in *Foundational Fictions*, the failed romance of the novel serves to establish a founding fiction for the Cuban nation, I would argue that the amalgam of tensions in the text assumes an a priori idealization of the past, as tradition and customs. The deployment of costumbrismo in this novel shows that this idealization is a modern myth. The characters' encounter with history, what really happened, rather than a mythic past, comes through as an unsettling shock. In this confrontation with history, Sab functions as their erstwhile narrator and tour guide, and though he has access to the land and its mysteries, he will not ultimately face that history. As they approach Cubitas, the vegetation shifts from the typical Cuban lushness to that of intermittent native trees "que parecían en la noche figuras caprichosas de un mundo fantástico. El cielo empero era más hermoso en estos lugares: tachonábase por grados de innumerables estrellas" (98). This is a journey into an almost Gothic Cuban mode in which the world proper ceases to exist, and the characters are left in a "mundo fantástico" with a sky covered in stars: a sky not yet dulled by civilization. It is in this context that Carlota notices a singular light that shines brightly and disappears, whose mythic origin Sab provides at the request of Don Carlos, Carlota's father. According to Sab, the light is the haunting presence of Camaguey, who was brutally killed by the conquistadors. Since his death, "esta tierra tornóse roja en muchas leguas a la redonda, y el alma del desventurado Cacique viene todas las noches a la loma fatal, en forma de luz, a anunciar a los descendientes de sus barbarous asesinos la venganza del cielo que tarde o temprano caerá sobre ellos," says Sab (100). As they enter into rural, peasant Cuban life and an almost untouched place, the characters find an environment and phenomenon full of wonder. As is to be expected, what they find accompanying this place is narrative, a traditional story, a local legend proper of costumbrismo, whose superstition is supposed to charm them, as is suggested by Don Carlos' laugh at the mention of this fleeting light. Instead, the story, as fantastic as it is, remits them to history, to the past atrocity that decimated the Cuban Taínos. Carlota feels the tragedy, but strangely states that "paréceme...increíble que puedan los hombres llegar a tales extremos de barbarie" (101). Indeed, she thinks it must be an exaggeration, which does not prevent her from crying about the lost Indian race...and imagining herself and Enrique living as innocent Indians before the conquest. The costumbrismo and the history it introduces are once again juxtaposed with one another. Moreover, the clash between the two versions of history is projected into their very present: at Don Carlos' behest, Sab reveals that it is up to black men to avenge the Indians' demise (101). Even though Don Carlos is the one who asks Sab to deliver the prophecy, he himself ends the discussion, feeling anxiety because of the recent fate of "una isla vecina" (Haiti) whose slaves successfully rebelled.

As is suggested first in this prophecy of rebellion and later by Sab himself, it is up to Sab to resolve this tension internal to a mixture between Romanticism and costumbrismo, to stand up for tradition and yet to radically upturn that tradition. But for Sab, the realization of his own subjectivity through love, the quest to achieve wholeness through his Romantic complement, Carlota, is what is ultimately most important, not his debt to either history or the present. This refusal to look beyond his individuality, however, shows the limitation of the Romantic project: costumbrismo in this context turns back into the intermediary figure that can properly understand it and navigate it; the magician's spell returns to him as a curse and destroys him. Through his death, the novel does not suggest

that Sab ought to have destroyed Enrique or forcibly taken possession of Carlota. The novel, after all, is interested in affirming individual freedoms. Sab's failure is that he does not assume the role of revolutionary leader that he knows the slaves need (133) and that he can provide, that for all his sensibility and essential and social fitness to be the proper steward for Carlota and Cuba he cannot marshal his love of Carlota to become an emancipatory force. Yet, even if he did, it is clear that there is no real possibility for the emancipation of slaves within or without the novel because there was neither the historical nor the political means by which to make such emancipation general and lasting. This proliferation of impossibilities that the novel continuously indexes, through its content, formal elements, and contexts, brings us back to costumbrismo's asynchronicity with its own modernity. For if costumbrismo emerges out of newspapers and magazines published in bourgeois societies, its ubiquity in nineteenth-century colonial Cuba and its literature suggest a kind of articulation, in the Althusserian sense, that cannot but make us question what modernity really is and how different societies express their own unique and local modernities. Ultimately, the costumbrista settings and modality of the text beg the question of how tradition can dull rather than induce national feeling. As the novel spins an intricate web of parallelisms and mirror images through its deployment of costumbrismo, it uncovers the impossibility of its project: a universal reading of the body through physiognomy is revealed as essentialist and yet the social deterministic perspective also fails to find little purchase, prefiguring the gross limitations of both essentialism and social determinism; a treatment of the past as simultaneously mythic and properly historical also shows that either approach to history are catastrophically negligent. Under these forces, the mulatto slave who responds to an individual ethic may be revolutionary but not political, which in turn puts in motion his own destruction. In *Cecilia Valdés*, we will see that the individual will lose its appeal and the political will take precedence, that the political will become tyrannical.

## Chapter 2

### *Cecilia Valdés*: The Asymmetry of Politics and Ethics

“No era que se conocían, estaban reñidos o tenían anteriores agravios que vengar; sino que siendo los dos esclavos, oprimidos y maltratados siempre por sus amos, sin tiempo ni remedio de satisfacer sus pasiones, se odiaban a muerte por instinto y meramente desfogaban la ira de que estaban poseídos, en la primera ocasión que se les presentaba.”  
—Cirilo Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés o La Loma del Ángel*

#### Dialogical Exchanges and the Crisis of Referents

In *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel*, Cirilo Villaverde very explicitly creates, as the novel's 1882 title page description shows, a “novela de costumbres cubanas.” It is also sustained by a realist aesthetic, so Villaverde tells us (Villaverde “Prologue” xl). Under the organizing principles of realism—the nuanced and faithful representation of “reality”—the journalistic narrative techniques of costumbrismo are marshaled in *Cecilia Valdés* not for the representation of an indelible subjectivity connected to a place but rather as a literary *techne* used to radiograph the material conditions of society. As Villaverde attempts to make these conditions concrete, costumbrismo acquires the sharp, discerning eye of ethnography, though the objects of observation, or rather narration, are there purely in the service of the novel's liberal politics. Indeed, realism's fetish for the object, like romanticism's obsession with the subject, is so instrumental in this novel that the text is conditioned by two specific goals: a desired end of slavery and the emergence of Cuba as a free nation-state.<sup>1</sup> The novel's readers have already identified the instrumentality of literary modes and characters when exploring the tensions between the novel's antislavery thesis and the outcomes for the “subjects” and by-products of that thesis (the fate of mulattoes and blacks in the novel). After all, why exactly does the narrative mount a critique of slavery, representing the abuses of a slaveocratic system, while sometimes representing slavery positively in its parochial quaintness, as in Isabel Ilincheta's coffee plantation, “La Luz” (Villaverde 394-395, 397-400, 419-420)? Why does the narrative locate Cuban culture in *mulatos*, particularly in the music and skills in fashion of the

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<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile to remember, as Roberto González Echevarría does in his “Cervantes en *Cecilia Valdés*: realismo y ciencias sociales,” that, unlike most other Spanish American Republics, Cuba remained a colony of Spain until almost the twentieth (1898) and practiced slavery until 1886 (73). Like Brazil, Cuba is quite an exception to Latin American historiography, which typically marks the age of independence in and around 1810. The Spanish Caribbean shares in this peculiar exceptionality as the Dominican Republic achieves its independence in 1844 from Haiti, the only nation to gain its independence from a former colony. Puerto Rico also passes out of Spanish control, like Cuba, in 1898, though its juridical, political, and social self-determination continue to be a historical question.

musician José Pimienta Dolores and the tailor Uribe, while at the same time representing *mulatos* as the most obvious “symptom” of the social illness of slavery upon the Cuban body politic? These narrative aporias suggest that the combination of costumbrismo and realism in Villaverde’s novel is so instrumental that the referents for the novel’s signs, particularly of the characters, is scrambled. This scrambling, or referential crisis, in turn, reveals that the price for a free Cuban polity is the exclusion or eradication of its *mulato* population. In this way, the novel suggests that a free liberal Cuba would seek to instantiate a political system that is a local or autochthonous colonial order. While the novel poses a liberal politics, it seeks to preserve the social configuration of Cuban society in its colonial form, thus maintaining the rigid social hierarchy and *immobility* of colonial order. In this kind of political order there seems an unrelenting conceptualization of Cuba, its population, and the world as object. The novel becomes the master of the voices that populate it, namely costumbrismo, thus reorganizing novelistic dialogism by using realism as a hegemonic literary language.

In this chapter on *Cecilia Valdés*, I compare the initial, didactic and “exemplary” designs of the novel, by analyzing the use of the exemplary *cuadro de costumbre* at the beginning of the narrative, with its disjunctive *dénouement*. The non-coincidence between the narrative perspective at the beginning of the novel and at its end intensifies the multiplicity of the text’s novelistic discourses and their messages, thus generating narrative perspectives, the many positions that the narrative creates for readers, that the text’s hegemonic realism, in the end, does not control. Out of this proliferation of perspectives emerges a notable discursive remainder: namely, the representation of the *mulatos* and the problem of racial mixture in Cuba. *Cecilia Valdés*, thus, leaves in its margins the “remains” upon which this novel is based: the *mulato* population, specifically the *mulata* Cecilia Valdés. In other words, the *mulatos* and racial mixture are simultaneously at the center and in the periphery of *Cecilia Valdés*. From these points of view, the representation of *mulatos* and racial mixture provides the novel’s structure without the text either integrating or expelling these portrayals. The ethically ambiguous positions that Villaverde’s text offers its readers are signaled by racial hybridity: the metacritical recognition of the text as generating a liberal, antislavery message by means of its formal hybridity *and* through its repudiation of racial hybridity points to the ethical limits of a politics divorced from a clear theory of subjectivity.

This metacritical recognition occurs by analyzing the *cuadros de costumbre* that populate the novel, particularly the representation of a *cuadro costumbrista* between grandmother and granddaughter, Josefa and Cecilia, which attempts to communicate a moral that initially seems to foreshadow Cecilia’s eventual demise. But it is not Cecilia’s demise that the novel ultimately stages. The novel does not satisfy the narrative expectations generated by the tale, thus violating its own narrative logic which would have led us to a sustained treatment of character Cecilia and her downfall. This violation destabilizes the link between the narrator and his audience, opening a space that allows readers to escape the omniscient third-person narrator’s narrative control. In this open space in which the narrator’s authority begins to vanish or dissolve, we can discern that advocating for the end of slavery—at the same time that hybridity is marked by criminality,

madness, and uncertainty—constitutes a narrative and ethical aporia. Readers, then, find themselves in the face of an ethically ambiguous situation in the face of two mutually exclusive political programs: adopting the novel's Cuban nationalism that sacrifices heterogeneity itself or maintaining the status quo of Iberian colonialism that keeps the Cuban people in a morally and economically subject position. In my view, the formal and thematic disjunctions in *Cecilia Valdés* allow readers, instead of adopting, to *adapt* or modify the meanings that the narrator attempts to transmit to them. And it is the *costumbrista* scene between Cecilia and her grandmother, more than any other, that alerts us to these disjunctions.

### Costumbrismo and the Ethnographic Eye

*Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel* has been called repeatedly the most important nineteenth-century Cuban novel (Fischer xi). Originally published in 1839 but later expanded and published during Villaverde's exile in the United States in 1882, the novel's critics have outlined several significant aspects of the text: the novel's importance as an antislavery text and as a historical novel;<sup>2</sup> the relationship between the ethnographic components and the realistic style Villaverde develops in the narrative;<sup>3</sup> and the question of gender, particularly the myth of the *mulata* in Cuban culture and society.<sup>4</sup>

In her article, "Who Can Tell? Filling in Blanks for Villaverde," Doris Sommer also deals with gender and the problem of slavery that undergirds the racial issues and representations of narration in the novel. But in this article, Sommer analyzes how the narrator defers stating the novel's open secret, Cecilia's lineage and her incestuous love affair with her half-brother Leonardo, which, according to Sommer, allows readers to notice their reading competency, and to notice how well they are performing their roles as readers (220). For Sommer, Villaverde presents his narrator as an incompetent one, which highlights the competency of readers as they work to fill in the blanks that the narrator has left in the narrative (222). Sommer's interpretation points to the relationship between text and readers that Villaverde establishes and attempts to highlight the ethical problems of narrators and readers who try to take control over the narrative's meaning, who, in the face of a narrative omission, try to supply suppressed plot and thematic details without taking into account other clues or narratives in the novel (214-217). For Sommer, the narrator's

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<sup>2</sup> For the importance of the novel as antislavery text, see William Luis, *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); for an analysis of the novel as the healing of a historical project, namely colonialism, see Aida De Toro González, "Algunos aspectos de la novela cubana en la década de 1830-40" (*Revista de la Universidad Central de Las Villas* 48 (mayo-agosto 1974): 229-30).

<sup>3</sup> Imeldo Álvarez González notes the ethnographic capaciousness of the text in his introduction to the novel ("Introduction." *Cecilia Valdés*. By Cirilo Villaverde. 2 vols. Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1981. 5-46).

<sup>4</sup> Vera Kutzinski studies the role of gender and the historical formation of the *mulata* archetype in Cuban society inaugurated in *Cecilia Valdés* in her *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

incompetence as a storyteller produces interpretive or content limits that readers will want to exceed (229); it is this possibility that energizes Sommer's critical intervention. By offering this analysis that focuses on who takes control of the narrative and how the narrator stages the limits of the *criollos'* knowledge of their social world, Sommer has made an invaluable contribution to understanding this novel. However, what interests me most are the aesthetic-ethical positions that readers must face when the narrative takes a particular direction but ends up at an unforeseen or unexpected endpoint. Readers' response before a seeming dearth of information (the novel's secret is, admittedly, an *open* one) does not concern me as much as readers' response to the information clearly and patently given, particularly as this information sets up expectations that the novel does not satisfy. Given *Cecilia Valdés'* meditation upon slavery, social mobility, and race, the aesthetic-ethical issues that the novel brings up at the textual level and at the level of reading lead to a sustained reflection upon these social issues. And the *cuadro de costumbre's* dialogical relationship with the rest of the novel points most aptly to the social incongruences Villaverde's narrator seems to be unable or unwilling to resolve.

*Cecilia Valdés* posits an antislavery and liberal politics for Cuba as a nation-state free from Spain's colonial control. This politics and vision is principally directed to the social class that could bring about this ideological, political, and economic shift: the Cuban oligarchical *criollo* class, particularly *criollo* men. In other words, the observations of the ethnographic "ojo conocedor" of the novel's omniscient narrator are from the point of view and *for* the point of view of *criollo* men. Surprisingly, this is an aspect of the novel for which the first chapters of the text do not prepare the readers: the exemplary tale of Narcisa, the cautionary tale narrated by Josefa, or Chepilla, to her granddaughter Cecilia at the beginning of the novel, seems to direct the cautionary elements of the novel to Cecilia and to women readers. Moreover, both the novel's primary title and the mystery surrounding Cecilia's origins help generate a readerly desire to know about the character and the details attendant to her place and future in La Habana's society. In addition, as Cecilia listens to her grandmother's exemplary story, her role as listener is parallel to that of the novel's audience: both character and audience are cautioned as to particular evils that may ruin them (waywardness and slavery, respectively).

The narrative encourages reading and looking at Cecilia almost from the outset, usually in ethnographic and erotic modes, respectively. As in *Sab*, this focus on the exceptional *mulato* character, Cecilia, is achieved through *costumbrista* description. Indeed, the very frame for the exemplary tale is an extremely visual and detailed account of Josefa and Cecilia's humble living quarters: the outside door had been red but was not worn, and the windows likewise were missing any paint (Villaverde 78). The interior, "si cabe," was even worse, consisting of one room divided by a screen to create a bedroom (78). The narrator positions himself at the door and produces a "panoramic" vision of the room going from left to right: on the left, a statue of a "Madre Dolorosa" being run through a sword of fire and illuminated night and day by two makeshift candles (78). Signs cover the walls, doors, and screen that read: "¡Ave María Purísima! ¡La Gracia de Dios sea en esta casa! ¡Viva Jesús!..." (79). The portrait is one of extreme poverty, and the narrator states that he spends so much time describing it so as to contrast the abject misery of the scene with Cecilia's



exceptional beauty (80). What is most important to note, however, are the minute details represented and the ways in which the narrator has immediate access to the interior of the household, so much so that he seems to “see” from his vantage point the cooking fire and other particulars located outside, in the house’s yard (79). In contrast to the descriptive but almost poetic language in *Sab, Cecilia Valdés*’ narrator produces an image of Josefa and Cecilia’s home that, if given the chance, one could easily draw or even stage with remarkable ease. The narrator places the reader in a narrative snapshot of the poor *mulata* household, a snapshot that describes but also lays bare the setting. A curator at a museum of natural history could not create a better montage; the only thing missing would be the label: “la mulata en su casa, c. 1825, La Habana, Cuba.”

It is within this *costumbrista* portrait of the *mulata*’s home that the exemplary tale of the girl Narcisa is narrated. This tale is a warning for the young Cecilia: attempting to dissuade Cecilia from wandering through the street and persuading Cecilia to pay attention to her wishes, Josefa tells her the story of the young Narcisa who, while her grandmother prays, hears a violin, attributes the sound to a dance, sneaks out of her house, and meets a gentleman who offers to accompany her. However, the gentleman turns into the devil and, climbing onto Angel tower, which lacks a cross, throws Narcisa from the top and kills her (86-88). Generally, the structure of the exemplary story mimics that of folkloric narratives: the narrative’s characters confront a dangerous or threatening situation they must surpass; the narrative’s plot leads them to either surpass or be defeated by the obstacle or challenge they must face; and the narrative’s ending presents a pedagogical moral that promotes social values specific to its society and culture. While this tale generates narrative expectations regarding the protagonists’ eventual annihilation, it does so in a markedly unexpected or paradoxical way. Josefa begins her narrative by establishing the scene, starting with “una noche muy *escura* [sic], en que soplabá el viento recio” (87). Having previously stated, “iba a suceder una desgracia” (87), Josefa sets an eerie, almost Gothic tone through the usage of the dark and windy night and, thus, leads readers and Cecilia toward a moral tale. Josefa continues the narration with a “por cierto” that connotes something simultaneously terrible and improbable that will end up in “la desgracia”: an encounter with the devil. At this point of the narrative, this detail, that the day in which the story takes place, “día de San Bartolomé,” is one in which “se suelta el Diablo desde las tres de la tarde,” is only metaphorical (87); that is, it is a day in which something bad can happen. As the narrative progresses, Josefa transforms this seemingly benign and commonplace metaphor into reality, exhibiting a typical aspect of a fable: the representation of something abstract (the moral) as something concrete (the plot) that resists all types of interpretation except for the one that leads back to the moral that occasions the fable (in this case that young girls should obey their grandmothers and not wander through the streets alone). Josefa finishes setting the scene by relating that the grandmother was praying while the young girl was singing (87). And it’s not just any young girl: her name is Narcisa. Even if Cecilia may not understand the allusion, most of the novel’s readers will understand that the girl’s name defines her as narcissistic or self-centered, a characteristic that Cecilia displays as a child as she willfully disregards her grandmother’s rules and as an adult as she deploys her charms to dazzle men. Josefa’s very last touch to the scene is to note that she “[se acuerda] como si fuera ahora mismo” (87).

Pointing to “ahora mismo” shows how her tale has no more function for Josefa than to underscore what she has just been saying to Cecilia, not to wander through the streets by herself. This element is further reinforced by the fact that the telling of this fable follows immediately after Cecilia arrives at her house and finds Josefa praying just like Narcisa’s grandmother in the story (82-84). Moreover, by “remembering” the events of the story, Josefa marks her authority to tell the tale: saying that she remembers the events of the tale as if they were happening at that very moment, she describes herself as a witness of what happened, as an “ojo conoedor,” like the novel’s narrator. Representing herself as a witness, Josefa attempts to mark the tale as true, but this veracity vanishes when Josefa describes how the young gentleman reveals himself to be the devil. This gesture toward reality is interesting: it’s a strategy common to Realism, indexing as it does “the real,” but which at the same time may suggest the past of the story world of the novel. That is, Josefa seems to be “writing” or speaking a moral tale out of what happened to her and her daughter, something that happens again to Cecilia, thus transforming Cándido Gamboa, Cecilia’s father, into the devil and her daughter’s madness into Narcisa’s death. Josefa’s telling of her own story and its repetition as the novel’s plot underlines the literary didacticism of the story, the moral(s) that it produces, and the self-reflexivity in the novel.<sup>5</sup> Viewing Josefa’s story only as an example of foreshadowing actually strengthens what I am arguing, for if her story is understood as a foretelling of the novel, this foretelling “goes wrong” and is decidedly incongruent, if perhaps not with the development of the novel’s plot, with the narrative’s ultimate focus on Leonardo.

From this story told as if it were true, Josefa extracts the moral: “Puesto es, hija, lo que le sucede a las niñas que no hacen caso de los consejos de sus mayores” (88). The moral is obvious and simple, but it is not the only one: the story also notes that girls should remain in their homes and that they should beware of unknown gentlemen, particularly those of a different social milieu. There are at least two factors in this exemplary tale and its morals that are particularly important. First of all, Josefa’s extraction or interpretation from a tale that offers several morals is indicative of the novel’s generation of moral and ethical pluralities that are ultimately reduced into one hegemonic account. This absorption into one master discourse tries to create a specific effect but ultimately fails in producing one perspective or result either within or without the story world. Secondly, this tale, as it attempts to but fails in educating the young Cecilia, sets up expectations for the audience about Cecilia’s role in the novel and the purpose of the tale. Indeed, the mystery that

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<sup>5</sup> Josefa engages here in a Realist strategy that Villaverde employs ubiquitously through *Cecilia Valdés*: mixing the fictitious with the “real” or historical. In Villaverde’s case, the narrative world of *La Habana* he constructs is one in which fictitious characters interact with historical figures, most notably for me the Master tailor Francisco Uribe. For detailed analyses of Villaverde’s Realism a reworking of the historical novel that mixes the real with the fictitious, see Ottmar Ette’s “‘El realismo, según lo entiendo’: sobre las apropiaciones de la realidad en la obra de Cirilo Villaverde” in *Apropiaciones de realidad en la novela hispanoamericana de los siglos XIX y XX* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1994) and Diana Álvarez-Amell’s “La dos caras de Cecilia Valdés: entre el romanticismo y el nacionalismo cubano” in *Hispania* 83.1 (2000): 1-10.

surrounds Cecilia and the correspondence of Narcisa with Cecilia suggests that Cecilia will occupy a central role in the narrative. Moreover, the placement of this tale at the beginning of the narrative and the relationship it creates between Cecilia and Narcisa also suggest that the tale functions as the typical first chapter of a novel or the first stanza of classical poems: as a theme, motif, or “thesis” that the novel will set out to “prove” in the style of Realism. In some ways, the novel fulfills these expectations: Cecilia continues her “miseducation” in the streets of La Habana; she meets an unknown young gentleman, her half-brother Leonardo; and, she is metaphorically and socially destroyed by this relationship. But if there is a parallel between the plots of the tale and the novel, the development of the plot is problematic. The educational function of the story is directed at the young girl (Narcisa/Cecilia), but the educational function of the novel is directed at the young gentleman (the devil/Leonardo). Even though the novel, in the end, destroys both characters, Leonardo is the only one who literally dies; more importantly, the final warning is for the *criollo* reader who is in danger from the *mulata*. By the end of the novel, the referents the exemplary tale sets up substitute each other—or, better yet, are misdirected; the parallels Narcisa/Cecilia and devil/Leonardo end up being reconfigured into Narcisa/Leonardo and devil/Cecilia. This kind of misdirection or referential crisis should not surprise us, given the incest motif of the narrative. In her introduction to the novel, Sibylle Fischer points out that regardless of whether incest in *Cecilia Valdés* is understood “positively” (demolishing barriers) or negatively (social illness), incest and incestuous feelings are about proximity and the kinds of blurring this kind of closeness produces (xxiii). No wonder, then, this text curiously and productively scrambles the referents of its signs.

What interests me most about this referential misdirection or crisis is that the story sets up a conventional novelistic expectation that serves as a kind of rubric for reading and understanding the novel. Indeed, this tale narrated within a *costumbrista* frame exposes the interiority of the *mulata*'s physical and psychic space. *Costumbrismo* in this tale, as with the description of Josefa and Cecilia's house, interacts with Realism to allow the ethnographic eye to *see through* social reality in order to produce a narrative that attempts to completely unpack the *mulata*. However, the novel's plot does not fulfill the novelistic expectations, shifting the focus of narration from Cecilia to Leonardo, and thereby undoes an important component to the communicative link between text and readers. It is this undoing that reveals both Villaverde's writerly inventiveness and the referential misdirection that the tension between tale and novel entails. Thanks to this referential misdirection, the realism that Villaverde announces as his aesthetic project in the 1879 prologue to the novel turns into a kind of inverted romanticism. In this inverted romanticism, the hero's (Leonardo's) subjectivity, instead of self-edifying, is destructive and unable to properly constitute the individual that is the subject and object of anti-colonial liberalism. By turning his half sister, Cecilia, into his concubine, Leonardo sets in motion his own destruction since, in order to avenge herself, Cecilia sends José Pimienta Dolores to kill Leonardo's bride, the wealthy Isabel Ilincheta (637). José Pimienta Dolores, either because of a misunderstanding or because of the unrequited love he feels for Cecilia, kills Leonardo instead of Isabel (637). If Romantic and Realist novels attempt to offer their heroes as characters with whom readers can identify, in this novel that identification is not possible: the narrator's attitude toward

Leonardo and his friends, the next generation of the Cuban *criollo* elite, suggests that even if Leonardo were to survive, the result would be Leonardo's continued exploitation of the other characters and slaves. That is, he would become the repetition of his own peninsular Spanish father whose interests, his own fortune derived from smuggling slaves and exploiting slave labor and his family's survival to the detriment of others, do not include the future and welfare of Cuba and Cubans.<sup>6</sup> In the end, Leonardo's death is not about preserving the character's subjectivity as inviolate nor is it about representing a modern subject, an individual in the liberal sense of the word, but of preserving and modernizing the social class and privilege from which this subject comes from. The novel sacrifices Leonardo for the good of the social class that he stands for, thereby muting his subjectivity and, thus, rendering him a purely instrumental novelistic character.

### Asymmetry and the Production of Surplus Meanings

The novel's narration creates an asymmetrical relationship between text and readers that, even though they are successful in communicating the ideas or themes of the novel (a Cuba free of slave labor and of colonialism that takes its place in the world market), generates a surplus of meanings that go far beyond the programmatic ends of the novel. This surplus of meanings is aesthetic as well as ethical. The novel's social and political impetus is paid by the effacement of the subject-protagonist and thus transforming him into a representative of the *criollo* class. Thus, the novel imagines a sociopolitical community that seeks to deal with black slaves, the repressed Other of slavery, by distancing itself *from* black slaves and eradicating the cultural and somatic link between slaves and masters, the *mulatos*. That is, the novel imagines a Cuba composed by *criollos* that are socially, if not economically, separated from blacks by ending racial hybridity and purging *mulatos*. Curiously this relation entails an attempt to unabashedly constitute an order of the Same whose relation to the Other is purely instrumental, which is to say a relation that is purely political and economic and that does not articulate an ethics.

In addition, the metacritical dimension of the text emerges out of the referential misdirection that Josefa's tale sets up in the narrative as well as by the generic hybridity this relationship announces in the novel. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that one of the novel form's salient features is its dialogism, how different languages enter in the form of the novel and animate it in a way quite distinct from other literary genres, partly because the other literary genres are kinds of languages that the novel form draws upon (46-49). With Bakhtin's insight in mind, it seems that Josefa's tale in *Cecilia Valdés* is a singular example of this literary dialogism because this exemplary tale furnishes the novel with two kinds of discourse: it introduces a cautionary tale specific to

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<sup>6</sup> In her thesis regarding *blanqueamiento*, Gema Guevara notes that *blanqueamiento* requires the repetition of the *mulata's* story: the repetition of the conditions of her own birth (a *mulata* mother and a white *criollo* father) (114). Josefa's foreshadowing by means of what might have already happened highlights the repetition of the *mulata* story. However, it also entails a repetition of the white (Spanish or *criollo*) man's desire for and abandonment of his *mulata* lover.

its context (a folkloric exemplary tale) and does so through Josefa's "mouth." In the tale, one can distinguish the local knowledge of Cuban *mulato* society, which denounces the abuses of the *mulato* population at the hands of rich *criollos*, and also the representation of a *mulato* language and voice as Josefa uses words like "cuasi" and "escura" that are not spoken by neither *criollo* nor newly imported black slaves. Moreover, the tale carries within itself a self-directed ethical concern regarding what it means to survive and thrive as a *mulata*. This concern clashes within the character of Josefa because as a character within the plot of the novel, she voices the aspirations of social and racial mobility of some *mulatos* when she advises Cecilia that marrying a white man is within her reach because she is almost white (Villaverde 84-86). However, as the narrator of the *mulato* tale, she recognizes the dangers of mobility itself and of imagining not just survival but success. Thus, Josefa's voice is complex not only because of the genres and utterances it uses but also because, paradoxically, it seems to be internally divided: the division within this character's representation speaks to the multiple ethical positions generated by the different positions through which the character makes its utterances. In this way, this tale, ostensibly from a *mulata* to another one and that contains a warning specifically for *mulatas*, helps create a vehicle, Cecilia's misadventures, that enables the reader to "view" or "tour" through slavery in order to point out the dangers for the white *criollo* population and to highlight the mistreatment of slaves. However, like Cecilia and the other *mulatos* in the novel, this tale is either "misplaced" or "misdirected," ending up as a warning for the young *criollo*, or it is deliberately put aside or forgotten in order for the novel to be able to serve, as the novel's title page states, as a "novela de costumbres cubanas" or a Cuban novel of manners. In the end, the text recuperates or integrates neither the tale, nor the *mulato* voice, nor *mulatos*. Satisfying its function, the story, like Cecilia, ends up being an opportunity and a vehicle in order to enter into the more important theme of the novel, slavery. In this way, both the story and Cecilia highlight the social and narrative marginality, the lack of social integration, of the *mulato* within the story world, and of generic hybridity within the discursivity, of *Cecilia Valdés*.

### The Emptiness of the Form

The *mulato* tale, even though it underlines the social limitations imposed upon the *mulata*, remains in the novel as an object, as a pretext, that makes the plot possible. Its potential to represent a complex subjectivity of the *mulata* is never achieved. Like the character Cecilia, the story generates a desire to know the *mulata* even more; this desire is satisfied but only barely as a stereotypical representation of the *mulata*. As opposed to the slavery that, with the exception of the representation of slavery in the coffee plantation of "La Luz," is a social problem that must be resolved, the "problem" of hybridity in and as the narrative appears to have no solution. The character of Cecilia Valdés personifies this lack of a solution for hybridity as Cecilia is represented as an object of desire that necessarily leads to failure, a failure that represents not an engagement with the Other but its reduction to instrumentality and its disavowal. Cecilia's notoriously well-known description as a child incessantly wandering through the streets of La Habana, the streets from which and in which she is educated, sets up the principal features of her character: beautiful, willful, vivacious, sociable, ambitious—and completely marked by something

decidedly sinister. The narrator introduces this sinister element by observing that “había demasiado ocre en su composición” since “la iluminación del rostro terminaba en una especie de penumbra hacia el nacimiento del cabello” (Villaverde 73). This sinister element literally and figuratively stains Cecilia. The narrator points out that even though “su sangre...estaba mezclada con la etíope...tales eran su belleza peregrina, su alegría y vivacidad, que la revestían de una especie de encanto, no dejando al ánimo vagar sino para admirarla y pasar de largo por las faltas o por las sobras de su progenie” (73-74). However, it is this “revestimiento” or “re-dressing” that calls attention to Cecilia’s racial and social stain: Cecilia is beautiful *in spite of* her mixed blood that goes back to “la tercera o cuarta generación,” a racial mixture that will always be noticed by “un ojo conoedor” (73). Though her beauty “re-dresses” her, she is already dressed in or wearing a racialized body. Instead of redressing or compensating for her racial difference, Cecilia’s beauty is based upon this racial difference, thus magnifying the focus on desire, the body, and race. Moreover, even though the narrator attributes the elements of her character, “la legión de pasiones que gastan el corazón,” to her education on the streets, to drinking “a torrentes las aguas emponzoñadas del vicio” and consuming “escenas de impudicia (sic)” (75), this sociological explanation that foreshadows Cecilia’s doomed end works well in tandem with the “penumbra” that an “ojo conoedor” will note in the color of her face. Though the narrator locates the vice and moral lapse of the “pueblo soez y desmoralizado” of nineteenth-century Cuba and La Habana, a moral fault whose root cause is slavery, these social ills produce and are literally personified in Cecilia’s body, which is also a sign of Cuba’s social and moral decadence and stagnation. Cecilia’s body makes patent and material the problem or moral knot of slavery: the corruption and degeneration of the Cuban *criollo* body politic, and of its society, from one that “should” be white and European and, thus, engage in liberal economics and politics, to one in between two modalities—coloniality and modernity—that, by extension, produces a mixed form of these two modalities whose symbol and/or product par excellence is the *mulata*. This mixed form exacerbates the decadence of *criollo* society since its “third term” “infects” the *criollo* family. In Cecilia’s case in particular, society’s decadence spreads in two ways: 1) the incestuous relationship with her half brother Leonardo, who represents Cuban *criollo* society and its future, which leads to his death; and 2) the product of this relationship, the birth of Cecilia’s daughter—yet another Cecilia who doubtlessly will be a repetition of Cecilia and her mother’s lives and who will continue to threaten the Cuban future as temptress to the next generation of Cuban *criollos*. In the character of Cecilia, Villaverde evades the common dichotomy of explaining the problem of race either through essentialist paradigms or social constructivist theories; in its place, Villaverde melds both of these ways to understand the racial question, at once pointing to the complexity of race and its physical and social implications, while simultaneously marking this complexity as a threat that necessarily leads to the destruction of Cuban society.

By making this critique, I do not propose that the *mulato* characters ought to have been represented in a totalizing way, even though this seems to be Villaverde’s novelistic project, since this approach would imply a nineteenth century version of “strategic essentialism.” In the introduction to “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” Gayatri Spivak writes that the Subaltern Studies Group, by attempting to write the history

of the subaltern, takes as a given a subaltern consciousness. For the Subaltern Studies Group, this consciousness emerges through the struggles between elite groups and subaltern groups, and it is this subaltern consciousness that produces the model for a general theory of consciousness (Spivak 11). That is, the Hegelian paradigm, comprised of the master-slave relationship, seems to be inverted in the model of subaltern consciousness: subaltern consciousness is primary and the master's, or elite, consciousness emerges as a response or against subaltern consciousness. According to Spivak, this subaltern consciousness is representative of strategic essentialism as it consists of a consciousness that the anti-humanist methods of the collective do not ascribe to (15). The salient issue is that the Subaltern Studies Group attempts to speak about a subject or consciousness that can only be found from traces found in an alien archive, of a group that either cannot or has not been able to speak for itself in history with its own voice (oral or written) in a readily legible way. In other words, speaking, writing about, or representing this subaltern voice entails imagining it. Imagining this voice means an entrance into the realm of fiction, exactly the locus for Villaverde. However, the novel's *mulatos* do not participate in this binary scheme that structures the racialized world and language of the novel. The *mulato's* hybridity does not easily fit into the theory of the constitution of a group who knows itself as a group because it distinguishes a difference in values between itself and another one. Thus, there is no "opposite" to mixture. Purity, even though it seems to connote unity, defines itself in racial terms through the oppositions white/free and black/slave; in a racialized language, purity implies a position always already "complete" or whole—either white or black, free or slave.

In *Cecilia Valdés*, the *mulata* is not part of the Hegelian scheme, whether one takes her as Hegel describes the slave or "upside down," as Spivak points the Subaltern Studies Group does. This scheme works in the novel exactly by being operational; from the beginning, it is a binary structure that attempts to separate a complex form, a subject-object, not wholly an idea nor a material, separating this complex into theoretical oppositions in order to be able to delve into its complexity. It seems that criticism disproportionately turns a theoretical tool for the examination of forms (either social or literary) into a description of reality. Method, then, becomes confused with the solution to a problem. In the best of cases, this operation results in a rather good description of the form, in an insightful description and theorization of the problem. In other words, I think that many times we focus on the theoretical categories we've formulated without truly approaching the problem itself. In *Cecilia Valdés*, neither the slave nor the *criollo* makes possible its opposite; the third or middle term makes possible these two as the *mulatos* function as the conduit between the two. It is from the vantage point and observing the positionality of the *mulata* that *criollo* society, as well as that of the slaves, can be understood. I am speaking in general terms regarding criticism not to re-state a well-known critique but to point out that Villaverde also participates in this kind of interpretative movement.

As a novelist, Villaverde does it in a slippery and surprising way: though Villaverde attempts to decipher the problem of slavery and the functioning of the socially and economically decadent colonial system, he traces the familiar paradigm of the racial

binomial black-white by mixing them without, however, deeply delving into mixture itself. That is, *Cecilia Valdés* manages, in spite of its misdirections and wanderings, to communicate its intended theses: the abolition of slavery as part of a great modernizing project, in social and economic terms, through which the country may attain its rightful place in the free world market and through which society may attain freedom in the configuration of the nation-state. But in Villaverde's novel, the social contamination that slavery engenders must be curbed, and the different social sectors should be separated; the price for this solution is paid by the *mulatos*, whose existence serves as a continuous and close reminder of the slaveocratic past. The very characters and the social stratum that makes possible the plot and the dynamic of *Cecilia Valdés*, the novel's very existence, end up being the novel's scapegoats.<sup>7</sup>

### The Spectral *Mulata*, or Hybridity's Void

Returning to the novel's titular character, Cecilia remains omnipresent in the text at the same time that she is largely absent from it. Cecilia Valdés' story is, from an "official" standpoint, the beginnings of the formation of a typical figure in Cuban letters that gives rise to the archetype of the charming but tragic Cuban *mulata*.<sup>8</sup> But this official version of this figure's cultural importance already registers the problems of the figure, and perhaps of Cuban racial mixture: Cecilia Valdés, one of the most important sources for the Cuban archetype of the tragic *mulata*, is not only charming and beckoning, both for readers and novelistic characters alike, but she is even more so because she is paradoxical, being at once omnipresent and absent. From the very beginning of the novel, Cecilia is nowhere to be found—as a baby, she has already been taken to María de Regla to be cared for when the novel's action begins—and the reader does not know her until she is depicted as a child running through the streets of La Habana. Even when she is presented, her description is as alluring as incomplete given the ambiguous terms in which the narrator describes her, as discussed above. After she appears briefly as an adolescent, she reappears fully formed, as it were, as the "virgencita de bronce," a personage that everyone worries about, talks about, loves, and desires but who is not quite manifest in much of the novel's action. Though she has to endure the decisions of others, and their consequences, even though she attempts to defy them, she (almost) never has the power to act, rather than *react*, in her world. If Leonardo is constructed as an object that represents the decadence of his class, this representation is nevertheless achieved through descriptions of his moods, life, routine, and relationships with family and friends. Cecilia, in contrast, though she is depicted in

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<sup>7</sup> In "Inexacting Whiteness: *Blanqueamiento* as a Gender-Specific Trope in the Nineteenth Century," Gema Guevara argues how the antislavery literature of the period focuses on the unrealizable desire of *blanqueamiento* precisely through the use of the *mulata*. Such a goal is impossible given that, by definition, the *mulata* will also transmit blackness, no matter how much she may pass for white. Interestingly, Guevara also notes how while literature tended toward *blanqueamiento*, Cuban music was becoming "Africanized" and that this transformation produced little if any racial anxiety from *criollo* intellectuals (110-114).

<sup>8</sup> See the first chapter of Vera Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993).



various contexts, is represented as particularly single minded: she is after a white husband and status within the whole of society in La Habana. That this character is often correctly understood as the representation of the Cuban *mulata*, as a representation of truths and stereotypes about the Cuban *mulata*, shows that the text itself is not able to delve into her character or interiority, save for her desire to marry a white man, which is curious for a text that goes into minute details as to the functioning, practices, rituals, and lives of most sectors of the population of Habana in the late 1830s, particularly of *mulatos*. The text seems not to be able to hold its attention on her character as a subject but rather primarily as an object: the object of desire, the object of an abject tale, and the means by which to inoculate young *criollos* to the temptations of “la canela.” That is, what the reader understands as Cecilia’s definition is her constant contradiction, stuck going around a circle of socially constructed as well as essentialist racializations. As the “contradiction” of two “opposite” races, Cecilia’s character animates these supposed contradictions from her very being and her passions. However, beyond this vicious circle, it does not seem that the text can offer a more nuanced view of her, or if it does, the reader is prevented from entering into that larger mystery. Clearly this is because the representation of Cecilia, as I point out above, attempts to construct the reader, through his narratee, as being part of Leonardo’s class, as having Leonardo’s point of view, keeping Cecilia as an object that is psychologically impenetrable, always looked for and desired but that either escapes or, when found, ends up being capricious (so that it is still escaping, slipping from, a liberal logic). Cecilia remains mere surface. Cecilia also escapes from both Leonardo and the reader’s grasp, thereby remaining the embodiment of desire. When Leonardo finally traps her in the fragile and unstable form of an adulterous lover, his *criollo* desire changes: his desire for the *mulata* as an erotic object transforms into a desire for wealth and social stability through his marriage with Isabel Ilincheta.

In *Cecilia Valdés*, the novel’s treatment of Cecilia is paradigmatic of its treatment of *mulatos*. This treatment of *mulatos*, like the relationship between Josefa’s exemplary tale and the novel, leads to an examination of how the text represents hybridity thematically and how it deploys it textually. In the face of the palpable terror of slavery, the *mulatos* are secondary. As the quote that begins this text shows, slavery is the principal problem of Cuban society in the novel. It is the social malaise that threatens to infect, if it has not already done so, all sectors of society. The fight between these two slaves, occasioned by the crash between a carriage and a cart, one of whom is an “africano de nacimiento” and the other a “mulato de la Habana,” both “lo mismo que el otro” because they are slaves, underlines the paramount issue of slavery in Cuba and how this problem affects not only slaves but also all of society (Villaverde 200). The crash brings about the manifestation of the “pasiones” that have never had “ni tiempo ni remedio de satisfacer” by having been “oprimidos y maltratados siempre por sus amos” (200). It is these passions generated by their condition as slaves that produce a hate to the death “por instinto” (200). This crash catalyzes the expression of passions or feelings that have not been able to be expressed; it is the release of repressed passions that generate hatred that seems to the narrator to be an instinctual or animal hatred. Even though they are “lo mismo,” the slaves “[se] desfogaban [de] la ira de que estaban poseídos” (200), without noticing their juridical and social similarity, allowing themselves to feel and express a hatred that is simultaneously

internal, instinctive, and also almost external, a hatred that “possessed” them as if it were a spirit or ghost. But the effects of this crash, and of the hatred and discord that become visible, go beyond the two slaves, moving on to the social environs that they find themselves in: the young ladies in the carriage “pusieron el grito en el cielo” trying to get the slaves to stop fighting and “los españoles de las tiendas, los oficiales de la sastrería...aumentaban el ruido y la confusión con su vocería y risotadas, señales ciertas del júbilo con que se presenciaban el combate” (200). The fighting slaves, the “vocería” and “júbilo” of the witnesses, the young ladies’ screams, and the closing of the civic and commercial transit due to the crash and the fighting all produce a cacophony, a chaos, that creates an aural snapshot of the social anomaly that slavery produces.

How does this example of the evils of slavery signal the ethical problems that I am arguing the representation of *mulatos* and the novel’s textual hybridity bring into focus? Clearly *Cecilia Valdés* proposes an antislavery politics, and the example discussed above points to exactly this end. It seems obvious to come to the conclusion that greater social justice would be attained by dealing with the root of the problem: slavery. But the immediate implication to this solution, which I think troubles all of the narration but particularly the novel’s end, is what to do after slavery ends.<sup>9</sup> Though it is certainly clear that the economic base of the island, according to the novel, should be coffee and that this economy should be directed by the Cuban *criollo* oligarchy, the novel does not quite pose a solution to the issue of its racialized inhabitants. However, the episode above, which announces the misery of, and attributes irrationality to the urban slave and the consequent urban and social disaster, also introduces a *mulato* social and economic space in the Cuban city: Master Francisco Uribe’s tailor workshop. The disorder unchained by the crash of the vehicles occurs in front of this tailor shop. And when this crash creates the conditions for the stealing of a comb being worn by one of the young ladies in the carriage, the text reintroduces the character of José Dolores Pimienta, a *mulato* musician and employee in Uribe’s workshop. This element is important for at least two different reasons. First, José Dolores thinks that this young lady is the “virgencita de bronce” or Cecilia Valdés, which makes him follow the “ratero” until he manages to get back the comb that, nevertheless, is crushed by his hand as he takes it back (200). Second, the contiguity between the scene on the street with the subsequent one within Uribe’s workshop very conspicuously suggests the contiguity of the African slave, the *mulato* slave, and free *mulatos* and the negative aspects of not only black and *mulato* slaves but also of free *mulatos* in La Habana.

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<sup>9</sup> In this conundrum regarding what to do with ex-slaves when slavery ends, *Cecilia Valdés* is similar to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While Beecher Stowe “solves” the issue about what to do with escaped or free slaves, her solution entails ex-slaves’ displacement to, at first, Canada and, ultimately, colonization in Liberia, Africa, a powerful idea advanced by some members of the U.S. abolitionist movement of the early-to-mid nineteenth century. If at all, in *Cecilia Valdés* such a solution is indirectly posed, as critics such as Gema Guevara has argued, as *blanqueamiento*. My own view is that this *blanqueamiento* is a literary act of erasure.

In the first instance, as José Dolores confuses the young lady in the carriage with Cecilia Valdés, this confusion points out the fluidity of the *mulato* body and of *mulato* identity, a dangerous fluidity since it short circuits the distinctions between social classes and hierarchies, underlining yet again the notion of Cuban society as one steeped in a social chaos in which rank and social class can no longer be read neither through the body nor vestimentary codes. Moreover, this confusion seems to take place because the young lady looks like Cecilia Valdés, and the text points out that Cecilia looks startlingly like her half sister, Adela Gamboa. Indirectly, this confusion seems to again return the reader, even if the young lady were not Adela, to that other problem that slavery makes possible and that the novel continues both to highlight and evade—the incestuous love affair between Leonardo and Cecilia, who are half siblings. The illicit love affair between Cándido Gamboa and Rosario, Cecilia’s mother, has various consequences that the text represents throughout the story: this love jeopardizes the integrity of the *criollo* family, the hegemonic nucleus of Cuban society; it exemplifies the “promiscuity” between social and racial classes that, the text suggests, should not be personally and affectively related; it produces an “intermediary” product between the terms slave-owning *criollo* and black slave that is not considered either *criollo*, slave-owning, black, or slave and that destabilizes these categories even more; it makes even the most “universal” social taboos, like the romantic love between siblings, permissible. That is, what is *mulato* in the novel, as the incest represented in it, seems to be figures of what is outside of “nature,” by which I mean socially-constructed nature; it seems to represent something monstrous that generates entertainment or amazement, a spectacle that produces both interest and horror in the spectator-within-the-novel (the narrator) and/or the reader. In the end, the *mulato* or the hybrid is a social excess, like the excess of passions between the half-siblings Cecilia and Leonardo, that either cannot be integrated into the novel’s Cuban society, because of its extreme Otherness, or *should not* be integrated since it is a cipher for, and producer of, social instability. Ultimately, in *Cecilia Valdés*, as I have been arguing, the very hybridity that makes the novel and the novel form possible is represented also as a formal excess. And it is this excess that produces a plurality of meanings, that each carry their own ethical concerns, that begs the question of how readers are to deal with the ethical ambiguities that this pluralism produces.

In the second instance, the contiguity between these scenes also highlights the problem of not being able to classify the hybrid/*mulato*. This chaos becomes apparent after the text introduces Uribe and his tailor’s workshop and precedes the notorious conversation within the workshop in which Uribe understands the issue of the unrequited love that José Dolores feels for Cecilia in terms of the oppression of those “de color” by white *criollos* (205). In this conversation, Uribe remarks that “los blancos vinieron primero y se comen las mejores tajadas; nosotros los de color vinimos después y gracias que roemos los huesos” and that he personally “en verbo, no [quiere] ni el papel” (205). The conversation is singular for various reasons: Uribe makes a comparison between whites and those “de color,” definitively framing the issue by means of a racial language; points out that the tension between whites and the people of color find themselves in “no puede durar para siempre” (205); and confesses his hatred for whites. Uribe expresses racial pride (206) and states that, even though he engages in “el randé vu” with whites, he clearly

knows how to “distinguir y [tener] orgullo” (206). What seems most important about what Uribe articulates, however, is not necessarily this almost proto “de-color” nationalism but rather his advice to José Dolores: “Disimula, aguanta. Haz como el perro con las avispas, enseñar los dientes para que crean que te ríes...Haz lo que yo. ¿Tú no me ves besar muchas manos que deseo ver cortadas?” (205). With these words, the trajectory that Uribe makes is impressive, both in terms of tactics and its sheer violence; he goes from dissimulating to wishing to see cut-off hands, taking up the possibility for social chaos and violence that the fight between the two slaves on the street and the confusing of, or rather substituting of, Adela Gamboa for Cecilia by José Dolores suggests.

The problem of the *mulato* body and the corruption of the *criollo* family that this body makes possible are displaced onto, and intensified, by Uribe’s voice. Though Uribe does not call for a (racial) revolution in that moment, Uribe’s advice to dissimulate comes from and adds to the threat that the hybrid in itself, “essentially,” embodies: the inability to classify *mulatos* within the “theory” of the social hierarchy, which also entails an interruption of this paradigm and makes impossible being able to read and know social reality. The *mulato* body, the hybrid, jeopardizes the Cuban caste system’s underlying social epistemology, and dissimulation by *mulatos*, who are largely represented as illegible given Cuban social paradigms, complicates even further how one is to understand and know Cuban “reality.” Through Uribe, the novel represents a *mulato* who occupies a racially marginal place and functions as the sign for the corruption of the colonial social system that, though never truly in place in practice, nevertheless functioned as an ideological apparatus, as a rubric for reading Cuban social reality, and, according to the novel, should be preserved, if not in Cuba’s economic organization and orientation, at least in its social hierarchies and institutions.

Uribe also represents the problem and the political danger of a “near other” that, though oppressed, is not a slave and seems to desire its own political power. This last issue is even more important considering the advice of dissimulation that Uribe articulates: not only are *mulatos* difficult to classify, difficult to understand on whose side they are on and what their interests are, difficult to understand how they fit, if they fit, within Cuban society, but also that, along with the problem that the *mulato* body can seem to be white and therefore “lie,” Uribe suggests *mulatos* seem to have an affinity or desire to act or dissimulate. That is, not only can *mulatos* not be trusted in essentialist terms, they cannot be trusted in important socially embedded ways, cannot be trusted in words and deeds. It should not be strange, then, that Uribe is a free mulato and a tailor, a member of the artisan class, with a ready clientele and thus economic success and means, someone who is in contact with various layers of Cuban society and, thus, enjoys great social and economic mobility. Like Cecilia, Uribe is sought after and valued specifically for his aesthetic contribution to society and can move between “los de color” and the masculine *criollo* oligarchy in the novel, though he cannot enter into the seat of true power in the novel’s La Habana, just as Cecilia can never enter into “proper” *criollo* society because she cannot marry Leonardo. What is most radical and revolutionary in Cecilia and Uribe is precisely that both believe that they deserve and imagine entering into “high” Cuban society, entering into an economy of power that has produced them and with which they

continually rub elbows but do not succeed in either having or taking advantage of it. What is most radical in the novel is that the politics of the emancipation of slaves is underwritten by the desire to erase the *mulato* population. The novel, in effect, attempts to save the Other, the black slaves, by eradicating a more dangerous Other, the *mulatos*, who is in nearer intercourse with *criollos*. Here, the gulf between politics and ethics looms large: the liberation of the Other goes hand in hand, paradoxically, with the refusal to face another Other.

### Aesthetics, Politics, Ethics

What to do, then, in the face of an anti-slavery liberalism that seems to not be able to even imagine where *mulatos* fit in Cuba's future, that seems to not be able to imagine where a large sector of the Cuban population fits in? Even though the novel tries to explain away its narrative remainders, these explanations, in which Cecilia ends up, like her mother before her and with her mother, in a mental asylum with a daughter who is even more almost-white, and in which José Pimienta Dolores actualizes the threat of *mulato* racial violence against the *criollo* elite suggested by Master Uribe, do not present a coherent vision for Cuba's future. The hybridity formed by the disjunctive relation between tale and novel and the purely functional role of the *mulatos* in the novel undermines the narrator's authority and puts into question the programmatic ends of the novel. Even though the narrator tries to lead readers to his vision of Cuba, the violations of the novel's narrative logic create a space in which to question the ethics of the ideological presuppositions and goals of the novel.

What does this space contribute? Perceiving the disjunction between tale and novel allows readers the ways in which he attempts to pen or hem them in, creating and offering two mutually exclusive paths: pro-independence nationalism and colonialism. An awareness of this strategy and these choices gives readers the option, instead of either adopting or not the novel's ideological agenda, to *adapt* the imagined paths the novel offers them, taking into account the benefits and consequences of these paths: readers can modify the idea of liberal Cuban future into one that includes *mulatos*, whom the novel represents as bearing autochthonous Cuban cultural values (e.g., music); readers can question the inherent exclusion in an "ojo conoedor" that is allegedly objective that tries to form a total or totalizing picture of Cuban society, an objectivism that is marked as much by careful attention to detail as it is by how it objectivizes that which it fixes upon; readers can imagine how sacrificing a part of its people for the purposes of obtaining a desired end, in this case an independent nation-state, would mark an entire society; readers can imagine different and competing conceptions of the social good; readers can imagine a politics that faces the Other, in its several multiplicities, rather than attempting to erase it, a politics whose ethics, even if not moral, may at least own up the implications of what it proposes. Given the nineteenth century struggle, particularly in the Black Atlantic, between a universal but homogeneous modernity and another kind of modernity capable of registering and strengthening difference, understanding how this novel's formal disjunctions generate meanings greatly enhances what the novel's narrative ethics are, if any, by allowing readers to circumvent them and, thus, how readers can either adopt its

programmatic goals or adapt these, thereby transforming them in goals whose ethics are not underwritten by exclusion.

In a novel like *Cecilia Valdés*, which so self-consciously announces itself as a novel of customs, the intersection of aesthetics, politics, and ethics becomes paramount. Theorists of the novel are once again researching the relationship between literary texts and ethics; it is a field that Dorothy Hale has recently termed “New Ethics” (896). In this field, the relationship between aesthetics and ethics are no longer considered separate or contradictory but rather complementary. The complementarity of literature and ethics seems a significant starting point for me in studying novels, particularly those that either feature custom sketches or take as their object of narration social customs. This is because aesthetics not only provides the experience to imagine but also to receive previously non-conceptualized or pre-conceptualized material. As this material is disinterestedly formed or re-conceptualized into a new form, this new form opens up the space for readers to imagine *for themselves* that they can engage in this form-giving work. And this process also entails a critical ethical labor. By critical ethical labor, I mean the work that readers do when their own ethical models encounter the coded ethical values that are immanent in literary texts at the level of form and theme. Particularly in custom texts, this work can easily lead to a blind adoption of the values explicitly expressed by the text, to an adaptation of these values, and to the creation of altogether new values. If, as ethical theories from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggest,<sup>10</sup> ethics are about normativity, about a code for regulation relations in society, I am arguing that aesthetic texts break up what is “normal” and help generate alternative versions of what is normative.

In thinking about how texts destabilize and offer different kinds of world views, then, I am not speaking here, as Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum might, about how readers respond to characters and plot and choose whether to model their behavior based on these models or not (Booth 9, 11; Nussbaum 3-5); that kind of critical enterprise, for which some literary texts offer themselves, seems moot insofar as a link between art and behavior seems unwieldy to investigate. Oscar Wilde’s pronouncement in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” seems particularly germane insofar as “moral” or “immoral” texts do not necessarily lead to behavior, either affirmatively or negatively. However, how “well written or badly written” may indeed lead to a sustained critical engagement on what is proper, responsible, or for the “good of all.”

My focus on ethics does not entail, however, an emphasis on morality. Indeed, an important aspect of my analysis is to differentiate between ethics and morality and to disentangle discussions of aesthetic and social values from the quagmire of traditionalist, antiseptic morals. Briefly, I take ethics to mean competing conceptions of the good, following socially and culturally specific principles. These different conceptions of the good may not be considered “good” by all but can be considered at least coherent within their

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<sup>10</sup> For an incisive account of ethics and normativity, see Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

specific contexts. For example, a slaveocratic regime may seem preposterous to most twenty-first century readers, but that does not mean that slaveholding societies did not produce theories for why chattel slavery was not only good for slave owners but also good for slaves, as was the case in many parts of the slave-owning southern United States. In his *Shadows of Ethics*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham explores the relationship between morality and ethics in literary studies. He notes that within ethical choice, a choice of principles has already taken place (28), as I illustrate above with a general example of abolitionism vs. slavery. He goes on to state, “every ‘ethical’ decision violates some law or other, and violates it precisely because it is ‘ethical.’ So ethics includes within its internal structure a ‘nonethical’ [or contradictory] element. The traditional name for this transgressive element is ‘morality’” (29). For Harpham, “morality” is the ethical choice that has “won out,” the ethical path, laden with a set of cultural principles, that reaches prominence and acts to close all other ethical choices (29-30). Morality builds authority by not only tapping into deep-seated cultural beliefs and attitudes, but also by gaining authority by means of its alliance to history and tradition. However, morality’s triumph does not eradicate other ethical choices: “It is morality that realizes ethics, making it ethical. At the same time, however, morality negates ethics, and needs ethics in order to be moral” (29). Morality, then, may eclipse other ethical paths, but they remain extant as part of what helps shore up and destabilize morality. I am arguing that aesthetic experience catalyzes ethical thinking that can disclose the distance between the moral center of the story world and other notions of the good found but marginalized in that world. In *Cecilia Valdés*, the powerful emphasis on politics, then, suggests that there is certainly a morality to these politics—a totalizing moral force that is powerful and attempts to subjugate the ethical possibilities that the text portrays under one rule. It is this kind of alliance between a single-minded politics and an overbearing hegemonic morality that, though perhaps effective in the tyrannical form of the dictatorship, nevertheless produces an unstable Cuban society in the nineteenth century.

The representation of customs either as *cuadros de costumbre*, local color, and/or sketches, is the linchpin to the of the aesthetics-politics-ethics triad. Through formal elements like narration, point of view, and structure, custom pieces especially require an encounter between texts and readers in which readers must face up to the ethical demands of texts. That is to say, literary custom formally narrates the particular brand of ethics it champions, while at the same time representing other discarded, ethical versions. But the discarded versions are not only the vulgarly Manichean opposites of the values that the texts espouse, but also a wide range of often only partially conceived notions of the good. In this way, the literature of customs in the nineteenth-century Americas, especially in Cuba, demands an encounter with ethics writ large, in their protean generalities and their specific, closed particularities. This facing up to the ethical demands of texts enables an awareness in the audience of how these texts posit their values. This awareness is achieved through form, which is how ethical questions become discernible for the audience. If, as Harpham argues, drawing on the work of Gerard Genette, narrative moves from an initial stable condition, an *is* that *ought-not be*, to a condition that searches for unity, that is and *ought-to-be* (36), literary custom represents traditional values that describe how things *are*: custom represents the specificity of a place and its people by describing picturesque

scenes and social types in order to reproduce its vision of the world. However, the presence of critique in the literature of custom means that there is a problem in social reality that needs to be addressed. In such cases, literary custom posits a slightly modified *ought* or stable moral vision in which the imperfection of the world is cured. Introduced into the novel and interacting with the novel's multiplicity of genres, voices, and subjects, however, activates the description inherent in literary custom; in the novel, *cuadros de costumbre* and sketches reveal either a locus from which to escape or approach. Literary custom asks readers to imagine how else the world could be, even when it quickly forecloses this kind of inquiry by prescribing a moralistic *ought* that attempts to instantiate a law of *Sameness* in which the Other is abolished or expurgated. As I have been discussing, the substitution of the *mulata costumbrista* tale at the beginning of the narrative for the literary and political focus on saving the *criollo* class is an example of just this kind of attempt to create a Cuban body politic that is *Same*. In this way, Villaverde prefigures Jose Martí's double claim, in the 1893 "Mi Raza," for an interracial alliance in Cuba while at the same time stating that there are no more races in Cuba (Gillman 107). Admittedly, my interpretation of Villaverde's text suggests *Sameness* by eradication while Martí's is clearly the rhetorical formulation of a nationalist *mestizaje* that would create national feeling, la Cubanidad.

In *Cecilia Valdés*, the violations of the narrative logic and the symbolic sacrifice of *mulatos* in order to foment a pro-independence, liberal, and abolitionist future for Cuba means that this novel dramatizes formal literary problems that produce aesthetic-ethical effects for readers and are suggestive of powerful social values and valorizations. In this narrative, the hybrid discourse of the novel comes into sharp focus by means of the *mulato* population and its representation in the custom sketch. This language and discourse, as well as the hybrid population, are sacrificed in order to generate a master narrative that advocates for the end of slavery. In the end, even though Villaverde does not propose a future for blacks in Cuba, the future of *mulatos* is even more hair raising: the *mulatos* produce unbridled passion, incest, madness, criminality, racial corruption, and death.



## Chapter 3

### Reconciling and Emending: Brazilian Manners in *Quincas Borba*

#### Whence Madness? Ambiguity, Dissimulation, and Imagination

As opposed to *Sab* and *Cecilia Valdés*, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis' *Quincas Borba* (1891) does not advocate for clear and succinct social and political positions. What *The Scarlet Letter* and *Quincas Borba* do share is a similar ambiguity that requires that the reader activate meanings of the text. Indeed, as Earl Fitz has noted about Machado's post-1880 novels (*Brazilian* 188), in both novels the literary text itself, the signifying apparatus, emerges as the true protagonist of the narratives. Machado, a Brazilian of both African and European descent, does not take race, slavery, or gender as themes. Instead, Machado's work provides a masterful and incisive look at the Brazilian upper class in the late decades of the Empire and the end of slavery in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, through the novel's main character, Rubião, Machado takes on a pedestrian form of social alienation—madness—which the reader is repeatedly encouraged to interpret. However, the representation of alienation as madness emerges out of the vicissitudes of Brazilian upper class customs. In other words, while the novel emphasizes Rubião's marginalization and madness, I argue that Rubião's social incongruence with carioca society is an epiphenomenon of the customs in Rio de Janeiro, namely of his inability to perform or recognize in others the ubiquitous upper class Brazilian custom of dissimulation.<sup>2</sup> As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that carioca customs are at once courtly and bourgeois, colonial and postcolonial. Taking place during the historical period in which Brazil transitions from an empire to a constitutional state, carioca customs are essentially in flux: on the one hand, the highly hierarchical world of a court, based upon an aristocratic system, are still extant; on the other hand, the adoption of bourgeois values, especially by a good deal of the "enlightened" upper class, opens the door for upward social mobility, especially by those who possess liquid capital. The linchpin of this uniquely Brazilian paradox is dissimulation, which helps to eliminate the friction within a slaveocratic system in which the social actors see themselves as modern, enlightened liberal thinkers.<sup>3</sup> It should not surprise us that existing and thriving in

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of Machado's work as a representation of the specific vicissitudes of the Brazilian upper class in the nineteenth century, see Roberto Schwarz' *Um Mestre na periferia do Capitalismo: Machado de Assis* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Dissimulation is an important aspect of nineteenth-century novels that focus on manners. It is not a concrete social manner per se, but it is the pre-condition for social behavior and its interpretation. For Passos, "a dissimulação [é] a capacidade de ocultação das motivações reais de uma ação para atingir com isso o fim pretendido. A dissimulação é uma negociação do posicionamento dos atores envolvidos numa troca onde as regras, ou os fins, não se encontram claramente apresentados. Esse comportamento é marcado principalmente pela presença do cálculo, que submete os princípios éticos gerais a objetivos e motivações particulares" (69-70).

<sup>3</sup> In *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*, John Gledson locates *Quincas Borba* within its historical context, noting how the timeframe in which the novel takes place, the late

this kind of uncertain world, quite literally, might be maddening, particularly for someone as limited as Rubião. The reader's task, however, is not only to notice and interpret the incongruence of this ideologically contradictory world, but also to develop methods for critiquing and understanding ambiguity.

Along with its pointed emphasis on reconciling, the novel continuously stresses emendation. Indeed, the text sets up reconciliation and emendation as a conceptual pair always implicated in each other. The importance of emending becomes even clearer particularly as emendation for Rubião ultimately means a radical change of his perception of reality that leads to delusion, as he "becomes" Napoleon III, thus literalizing his alienation in Rio de Janeiro's social landscape. Ultimately, what is at stake in the representation of reconciliation and emendation is Rubião's failure, predictably, to fit himself to ambiguous social customs that, notably, depend upon being aware of dissimulation in others and the ability to carefully conceal one's own motives. However, neither adaptation nor avoiding these ambiguous social customs are tenable positions: on the one hand, a successful alignment with Rio de Janeiro's customs, if possible, would entail conformity but would yield social rewards; on the other hand, an unsuccessful alignment would mean social death. The former entails a wholesale adoption of largely unknown social norms that are an/aesthetic, the latter a proliferation of values that turns "reality" into a synaesthetic cornucopia. Moreover, the text's constant use of the language of reconciliation ("cotejar") and emendation suggests that the importance of customs goes far beyond a simple issue of adopting, adapting, or rejecting them. This usage underlines the internally protean structure of customs as social factors always already made *and* in the making. As I have pointed throughout this work, this irreducible quality of customs is parallel to aesthetics, politics, and ethics. What Machado's novel stages, more than any of the novels studied in this dissertation, is a forceful encounter with the reader. In so doing, Machado's novel simultaneously explores novelistic representation as well as readerly interpretation.

### Reconciling and Emending as Critical Tools

Though critics typically acknowledge that Machado's later work, after the publication of *Iaiá García*, signals a turn toward realism as his preferred mode of narrative production, they are also quick to point out that Machado's realism is his own (Gledson

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1860s, marks the end of the conciliação or "harmony," the tacit political and social understanding under Emperor Dom Pedro II that made possible the co-existence of modernizing, liberal bourgeois values with the landed ruling class in Brazil whose wealth and power depended upon slave labor (123-132). For Gledson, Rubião's madness represents the tension between these operant yet contradictory fact of Brazilian life just before the end of the Empire and the beginning of the emancipation of slaves (A Lei do Ventre Livre or Act of the Free Womb in 1871), which inaugurates Brazil's transition from an Empire to a liberal, constitutional system.

*Deceptive* 9-10).<sup>4</sup> Machado's realism often questions the so-called objective stance and paradigm of realism as an aesthetic project that attempts to be capaciously mimetic, as a mirror to reality. Machado's later novels indeed represent the story world realistically, but in a particularly subjective mode, often more reminiscent of realism's "precursor," romanticism.<sup>5</sup> In novels like *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* and *Dom Casmurro*, the subjectivity within an objectivist aesthetic paradigm is front-and-center, not the least because these two novels are narrated in the first person. But *Quincas Borba*, whose publication first in serial form and later in book form is nestled between the publications of *Brás Cubas* and *Dom Casmurro*, is narrated in the third person. *Quincas Borba*'s narrator is a much more realist narrator to readers, initially, because he adopts the masterful, objective point of view that is typical of third-person realist novels. However, what begins to emerge as the novel's narration and plot progress is the subjectivity characteristic of Machado's first-person novels, but this time, paradoxically, through the third person. This subjectivity, I argue, can be located through how the narrator addresses the reader and generates different subject positions for her, along with how he structures and deploys narration itself—how the narrator stages reconciliation ("cotejar") and emendation. Ultimately, it is not just how the narrator represents Rubião's alienation-madness but how the narrator structures the narration and performs his role as storyteller that frustrates readerly expectations and, by fictively attributing interpretations to the reader, challenges the reader's meaning-making process. Through Rubião's and the reader's parallel alienation, the novel opens up a cognitive and affective field in which the aesthetics-politics-ethics constellation comes into play. What is at stake, then, is not only the pleasure of the novelistic experience, but also whether the reader considers the options the text make available are acceptable for adoption, adaptation, or—given the novel's emphasis on reconciling and emending—confrontation.

I consider *Quincas Borba* as a novel of customs in ways perhaps atypical to Latin American expressions of custom and manners. Indeed, compared to Brazilian literary

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<sup>4</sup> For analyses of the development of the novel in nineteenth-century Brazil, see Antonio Candido's *Formação da Literatura Brasileira; Momentos Decisivos* (7 ed. São Paulo: Itatiaia, 2 vols. 1993) and Earl Fitz' *Brazilian Narrative Traditions in a Comparative Context* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Here, again, the question of how Brazilian, and more broadly Latin American, literature fits into accepted narratives of literary history is important. Machado, in particular, disrupts usual Eurocentric accounts of literary history as he uses all available writing styles and genres available to him, reshaping them for his own purposes in his production. Machado is an exceptional example of this treatment of literary techniques by Latin American writers because his writing alludes to an impressive array of styles and authors. But, generally speaking, most Latin American writers from the colony to the present, even at their most imitative, have approached European forms as a shopper at a market place, choosing as little or as many of these European wares as seemed most relevant to narrate or represent their particular realities. For a sustained discussion of this viewpoint, see Ralph Bauer's introduction to *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

production at the time, Machado's focus on discrete characters and their complexities are at odds with Brazilian custom sketches of the same period (49-51). In addition, as compared to either *Sab* or *Cecilia Valdés*, *Quincas Borba* does not feature local color and ethnographic mode attendant in *Sab* or the costumbrista sketches or scenes in *Cecilia Valdés*. Moreover, the novel does not highlight its characters as expressions or representatives of specific social types. Where one can readily understand Carlota Bellavista or Leonardo Gamboa as representations of Cuba or the Cuban *criollo* class, respectively, no character in *Quincas Borba* emerges as a concrete type, which is not to say that critics have not interpreted them to be representatives of either historical figures, the Brazilian upper class, or Brazil itself.<sup>6</sup> My interest, however, is on how the novel focuses on examining social manners and conduct, specifically as a study of (imagined) subjects and their familiar or plausible relations amongst complex social networks. In this way, *Quincas Borba* is a novel of customs as a novel of manners, reminiscent of Jane Austen's novels. Though Austen's writing meditates upon the role and experience of women of a particular class in English society, it also invariably represents not just English women's experience but salient values and codes of behavior in English society. In much the same way, *Quincas Borba*, and arguably all of Machado's post-1880 novels, focus on the specific experiences of nuanced characters that nevertheless capture prominent features of Brazilian social norms. In addition, *Quincas Borba* is like *Sab* and *Cecilia Valdés*: in its thickly auto-ethnographic dimension. To my mind, it is this kind of auto ethnography that Machado performs that allows for Roberto Schwarz, in his *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo: Machado de Assis*, to argue that the composition of the narrative reflects the conduct of the Brazilian ruling class; for Schwarz, volubility is a part of the compositional style of Machado and is a stylization of upper class Brazilians (18, 31). Thus, Schwarz identifies not just a link between Machado's novels and Brazilian society but also inherently to the stylized conduct of the Brazilian upper class. In other words, Machado's novels, focusing on such stylized conduct, are always already novels of custom.

In *Quincas Borba*, the novel's main character, Rubião, inherits a fortune from Quincas Borba, the philosopher figure already known to Machado's readers in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. A rural schoolmaster, Rubião leaves his native Minas Gerais for courtly life in Rio de Janeiro upon his inheritance. In this way, Machado's text begins much like a European realist novel, but this is where the similarity between European realism and Machado's own brand of realism ends.<sup>7</sup> Instead of proving himself to carioca society

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<sup>6</sup> For interpretations of Rubião as a figure for Dom Pedro II, see John Gledson's *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*, particularly pages 115 and 132. Additionally, in *Machado de Assis: Ficção e História*, Gledson reads allegorically for Brazil itself (111). Moreover, Roberto Schwarz reads Machado's work as representing the volubility of the Brazilian upper class in the nineteenth century both in *Ao Vencedor as Batatas* (1977) and *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo: Machado de Assis* (1990).

<sup>7</sup> Exactly where Machado falls in terms of literary history is a question of heated debate. As Earl Fitz points out in *Machado de Assis*, Machado uses all of the literary resources available to him in his own writing, particularly romanticism and realism, but he also deploys literary techniques that literary history associates with modernism and postmodernism

while irrevocably maintaining his outsider status, Rubião descends deeper into marginalization—and madness—as he first approaches Rio de Janeiro and stays there. Beginning with his train voyage, Rubião must contend with savvy social characters, principally Cristiano Palha and his wife, Sofia, who mark his naiveté and eventually siphon off his fortune. With no experience of life in Rio, Rubião is a spectacularly bad reader of Rio society, while the courtly characters are opportunistic expert readers. The novel ends with the loss of Rubião’s fortune and the loss of his sanity. He returns home to Barbacena, in Minas Gerais, to die in the novel’s penultimate chapter; the last chapter is reserved for the death of Quincas Borba, the dog.

*Quincas Borba* tellingly begins with a scene of contemplation: Rubião looks out of his window to the sea’s inlet in Botafogo, a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. The novel’s narrator quickly reports that Rubião seemed to be looking at the water but that, in fact, he “cotejava o passado com o presente” (47). Machado’s narrator begins the novel, then, by showing his mastery, by proposing how he can completely represent the characters’ thoughts and motivations even though the characters may appear engaged with something else. But the narrator also shows that the novel’s main character, like the reader, is going to be expected to reconcile past and present and also resolve the singular reversals of fortune narrated throughout the narrative. So begins the novel one critic has rightfully called a novel about alienation, not only in the typical, social sense of the word but also in its Portuguese dimension—madness (Bolle 18). The first part of the novel tells of how Rubião cared for the philosopher figure in *Brás Cubas*, Quincas Borba, and how he inherits the philosopher’s fortune. This inheritance causes him to leave his native city for Rio de Janeiro. But Rubião, despite best intentions, is nevertheless a character with limited intellectual powers; before his death, Quincas Borba pointedly tells him that he is “um ignaro” (60). However intellectually challenged, Rubião is burning with the same fever that affects virtually all characters in the novel: a dream of upward mobility, usually by means of gaining someone else’s material wealth. In some ways, it is logical for Rubião to desire a higher social station since he inherits Quincas Borba’s fortune, a result quite beyond his imagination at the start of the novel.<sup>8</sup> Though Rubião’s interest for preserving his wealth is

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(12). Fitz even posits that Machado is the link between Flaubert’s realism and Joyce’s postmodernism (21-22). However, as the title of John Gledson’s *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis* suggests, Machado’s work attempts to approximate “reality” in a realistic fashion but not necessarily through an objective representation of reality. Indeed, as José Luis Passos demonstrates in *Machado de Assis: O Romance com Pessoas*, the realism in Machado largely depends on representing characters with a deep psychology that are aware of the gap between who they are and who they would like (or pretend) to be (44-46).

<sup>8</sup> For even though Rubião, as he cares for the ailing philosopher, wonders if he might receive some benefit for his trouble, inheriting Quincas Borba’s entire fortune seems to take Rubião completely by surprise. The only stipulation in the philosopher’s will is that Rubião is to take care of his pet, the dog Quincas Borba. As the novel progresses, Rubião flirts with the notion of letting the dog escape so as to be rid of him; it is only his superstition of the transmigration of souls—suggested to him by a female slave in his

not as rapacious as others', I would argue that this is a matter of degree. Certainly the most sanguinely upwardly mobile characters in the novel are Cristiano Palha and his wife, Sofia. Indeed, these two, along with others that Rubião himself courts, siphon off great parts of his fortune: as Rubião's finances deteriorate, Palha and Sofia grow in wealth and prominence in Rio, penetrating ever deeper into the more exclusive courtly circles of the city and leaving Rubião behind.

In *Quincas Borba*, the narrative motor is the dialogical relationship between "cotejar" and "emendar," which the text establishes by conspicuously sprinkling these two words throughout the novel. "Cotejar" means to analyze, investigate, and to compare (Houaiss 855). Significantly, it is an editorial term that means to compare two texts in order to verify the veracity between two versions of the same book or edition, to find out the incongruities between the texts. In other words, "cotejar" is the task of reconciling different copies of a text with each other or of a text with a master or definitive copy or edition. Rubião's reconciliation of his past with his present, as the primary meaning of "cotejar" in this novel reveals, is an analytical comparison of one thing to another, yet its editorial meaning is even more suggestive because both Rubião and the narrator engage in acts of both reconciling and radically emending their texts, as I will show later. My point is that *Quincas Borba's* story is misleading: the reader's introduction to a rural man's new life in the cosmopolitan city belies the fact that character and reader will have to continuously "cotejar," reconcile or confront, what is before them. The novel describes, in the thick description of auto-ethnographic literature, a particular slice of encountering Rio de Janeiro's treacherous cosmopolitanism. But it also poses "oughts" that go beyond the social critique of the text: through its aesthetic work, the novel attempts to explore the inner workings of encountering/confronting/reconciling. Whatever "moral" extraction may be derived from this text pales in comparison to the capaciousness and rapacity with which the text discloses not a critique but how to perform a critique. What seems most significant is that this work of critique itself prevents a totalizing "moral extraction." Or, if it does allow a moral lesson, its bluntness, generality, and universality renders it morally and intellectually suspect (the "lesson" would be that Brazilians and all humans are so egotistical and base as to always deserve reproach; it is a moral as old as it is empty of content). The critique that the text generates by staging scenes of reconciling and encountering within a "tell-all" of carioca society prevents picking a definitive message. What is unleashed is the reader's restless response to resist, to delve, and, if meaning is to be formulated, to create.

### The Promise of Memory, the Problem of the Present

Machado places Rubião at the center of carioca society with only money, no particular virtue to speak of, and an almost complete imperviousness to education of any kind. In light of his intellectual and social simplicity, Rubião is at a loss as to how to cope or understand the remarkable reversal of fortune that has transformed him from provincial

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youth—that prevents him from getting rid of the dog altogether and produces in him moments of kindness for the dog.

schoolmaster to a wealthy man living off of his fortune. Nor can Rubião fully comprehend the new context into which this transformation places him. His only recourse for coping with these changes and his unrequited love, as already suggested by the narrator at the beginning of the novel, is memory. Rubião's refuge in memory begins at the moment in which he feels the social alienation of his life in Rio de Janeiro most keenly, namely after he is silently though unambiguously rejected by Sofia. Rubião, following a romantic script, predictably falls in love with Sofia and interprets her courtesy and attention as evidence of her affection for him. Indeed, it is difficult to interpret her steadfast looks and her sending him a basket of fresh strawberries with a very warm message as anything but overtures toward Rubião. In fact, they are overtures toward Rubião made at the behest of her husband, Cristiano (114-115); the Palhas together attempt to draw Rubião into their circle by protecting his interests, his wealth, while at the same time enjoying the financial and social benefits of Rubião's wealth. What Rubião does not see is that just as he cares for Quincas Borba the philosopher and benefits by inheriting his wealth, Cristiano and Sofia are engaged in the same kind of activity: the "protection" of a sort of country bumpkin that yields them financial gains with which to climb higher into the highly stratified courtly world of Rio de Janeiro. Instead, Rubião interprets Cristiano's version of friendship as what he perceives his own approach to friendship—a generous and reciprocal social tie. It is this open approach to friendship and his limited intellectual powers that render him unable to dissimulate or even imagine that others dissimulate, a dangerous deficiency in a world so in flux that hiding one's motives seems to be the social key for not only surviving but thriving. Indeed, even when Rubião knows enough to dissimulate, as is the case for his love for the married Sofia, he does so badly: his affection for her is readily legible to Palha, Sofia, and others. Unsurprisingly, Sofia's action and behavior become love tokens for Rubião, which leads him to eventually declare his love to her during a social gathering at her home, as the two of them look at the moon from the house's balcony. Taken up by his own discourse, Rubião seems not to notice Sofia's shock and reticence at hearing his love speech (95). Like the novel's beginning scene, this is another moment of expansiveness for Rubião, as this time he constructs a triad between himself, the moon, and Sofia to fit their supposed connection.

Immediately after declaring his feelings to Sofia, Rubião's present dissolves into his past, as he tries to *cotejar* or reconcile his present with his past, when he leaves the small gathering, descending from Santa Teresa, the neighborhood where the Palhas live, to the nearest taxi stand. Curiously, amidst his thoughts of Sofia, love, and the moon, the transaction of hiring a taxi reminds him of another time, years ago, in which he was in Rio also in the process of hiring a taxi. The narration of the past event here takes over the present. The memory is of two convicted prisoners, both black, followed by a crowd; one of these prisoners is to be executed by hanging. Though Rubião seems to want to leave and not take part in the civic ritual, he lets the crowd carry him (108), conforming to the expectation, being "conscripted" by the crowd, beckoned by the spectacle (the expectation) of the execution. Rubião closes his eyes before the prisoner is hung, but then opens them slowly to witness the execution (108-109). Immersed in his memory, Rubião returns to his present when the coach driver attempting to get himself hired wakes him as if from a dream. He is annoyed that he is brought back to the present (109). With regard to this

interruption of the past upon the present, the narrator comments that the memories “não eram belas, mas eram antigas—antigas e enfermeiras porque lhe davam a beber um elixir que de todo parecia curá-lo do presente” (109). It seems then that, regardless of the eccentricity of the memory—its content, what is significant in this scene is the age of the memories, that they are old nurses who provide an elixir that might cure him completely of the present. The past, as memories, become curative agents that redress a harm, disease, or injury provoked in or by the present. Whereas in the first paragraph of the novel *Rubião* reconciles the past with the present, makes them fit somehow or establish a concordance between them, this process of reconciliation takes a new tone and office in this later scene: reconciling the past with the present now entails alleviating or mitigating suffering in the present. Now the past and the present are not to merely “get along”; *Rubião* seems to invoke the past not as a supplement of the present but rather as its substitution. In other words, the past has to intercede in the present in order to somehow correct it or alleviate its pall despite the fact that the “antigas e enfermeiras” memories are of an execution. Though this shift does not entail an application of emendation, it is clear that merely reconciling, as in the beginning of the novel, is on the move toward emending. *Rubião* deals with the social alienation that this frustrated love plot represents with memories, with memories of a socially inferior subordinate being executed for an unknown crime, an execution approved by the crowd. *Rubião* does not seem to understand that the outcome of his meeting with Sofia yields no results because of social asymmetry, because wealth has led to economic capital and not social capital; the character reacts to the empty shock of the encounter but cannot represent it for himself in a directly intelligible manner. However, it seems clear that the social death of the rejection clearly brings forth the image of the social and actual death of the social deviant, the criminal.<sup>9</sup>

Though I am drawing a parallel between the prisoner and *Rubião*, *Rubião*'s experience seems to be focused on being part of the social mass that follows the prisoner to his execution, of being part and parcel of an anonymous yet socially united whole. Though moving, the crowd affords *Rubião* the comfort of belonging to his world. In *Machado de Assis: O Romance com Pessoas*, José Luiz Passos argues that Machado constructs characters that are aware of the double nature of their subjectivity, a split whose salient feature is the gap between who they are and who they wish to be or pretend to be (43). *Rubião* senses but cannot represent to himself this split characterized, as Passos puts it, “pela assimetria, por uma dissimilaridade que habita o próprio herói ou heroína; a dissimilaridade é a raiz do seu conceito da pessoa humana; fundamentalmente, esta noção é expressa pela aptidão do protagonista para imaginar-se desigual a si mesmo” (46). *Rubião*, unlike the protagonists Passos studies, does not have the ability to know himself in this way. This is

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<sup>9</sup> It is not as if other characters are not able to perform the kind of task in which they see themselves, their doubles, or parallels: Dona Tonica, obsessed with the goal of getting married, notices that something has happened between *Rubião* and Sofia and thinks that the two are romantically involved. Later, in the privacy of her room, she admits her rage at the situation but also understands the problem as principally a social one: for all her desire to marry, she understands intellectually that her predicament and her wish to marry are borne out of social need (102-103).



why he is not able to perform the custom of dissimulation: unable to notice the asymmetry between who he is and who he wants (or pretends) to be, he is not able to detect this asymmetry in others. Thus, the memory of being swept up in this crowd operates as a salve to ease the alienation to which the present exposes him—and that he feels even more keenly in the contiguous scene after he has been rebuffed by Sofia. Rubião will experience this sensation of belonging again when he rescues a young boy from being struck by a carriage and the witnesses clamor about him praising him (132-133). By the end of the novel, however, as Rubião is fully in the grips of his Napoleonic delusions, this same crowd ridicules him as he walks through the same neighborhood pretending to be Napoleon III. Indeed, the reversal is poignant because the young boy he rescues later becomes one of the neighborhood's children who run after him calling him names (309-311). In the end, after he has become mad, Rubião becomes the object of the crowd's derision, not its admiration. Thus, he eventually occupies the place of the convicts in his memory, and the memory ultimately functions as a prefiguration of social dismemberment for the very character for whom it seems so beneficial.

Rubião's Napoleonic delusions, along with the recourse to memory, represent how he uses imagination to reconcile the shock of the present. For Rubião's casting himself as Napoleon III and Sofia as the empress Eugenia is an attempt to instantiate a stable, though fraught, world. First of all, as the emperor, Rubião casts himself as the head of a stable and solid social hierarchy. Such imaginative expansiveness secures for him not only a central role but one that is his to command and where respect is a given, especially as an automatic, formalized custom. Being Napoleon III means being a social superior, arguably even superior to Brazil's own modernizing emperor, Dom Pedro. As the novel progresses and Rubião's delusions deepen, Rubião emends his present by drawing on a grand, imposing figure to ameliorate that present. Like Don Quijote before him, Rubião uses his imagination to transform his world; unlike Don Quijote, however, there is neither Sancho Panza nor any other ancillary character to tacitly enter Rubião's delusion and help him.

#### Narration Redux: Emending and Rewriting

Rubião's attempts to emend his life mirror the narrator's actual emendation of the text later in the novel. The narrator performs an emendation parallel to Rubião's delusional ones mainly by suggesting a love affair between Sofia and Carlos Maria, a fashionable bachelor who is part of the Palhas' social circle. As suggested earlier, one of the most striking elements of *Quincas Borba* is the emphasis on the performance of narration itself, particularly as the narrator deftly recasts the suggestions of an extra-marital affair as a product of the reader's mis/interpretation. As with many narrators, the narrator of *Quincas Borba* modulates the narrative by shifting point of view between an apparently omniscient third person and a restricted or limited third person and thus modifies the narrative and/or the audience's experience. This narrator intensifies the oscillation between universal and particular knowledge in the text not only by engaging in this kind of narrative work but also by representing himself as a witness who simultaneously highlights his own work in constructing the novel. As the narrator intensifies the diverse perspectives generated by the shifting points of view when he assumes the first person, he

often engages in revisions of the novel, emending what has come before. When the narrator radically revises the text by suggesting that the affair between Sofia and Carlos Maria has been the result of the reader's misreading, of her willful imagination, the narrator's implied reader and her values become apparent: the conventional shorthand of the preceding scenes emerge as what they are figured to be, conventional clues of customary extramarital relations in Rio's social world. In so doing, what becomes clear is not necessarily how commonplace such affairs are in the novel's social world but how customary it was to interpret essentially novelistic behavior, a prolonged look or a casual touch, as evidence of an affair, an interpretation that produces the affair itself in the social world without very much relation to its (lack of) facticity. It is this practice for which the narrator later admonishes the reader.

The narrator admonishes the reader through a very conspicuous metanarrative interjection, a frequent feature of Machado's narrator in *Quincas Borba*. It is very common for the narrator to address the reader, which he sometimes figures as a woman, sometimes as a man. However, amidst these stylistic choices that seemingly attempt to generate intimacy with the text, the narrator seems to forcefully and unabashedly assert his control of meaning after the pivotal scene in which Rubião confronts Sofia with evidence, an unopened letter, of her alleged affair with Carlos Maria (193-196). Sofia is extremely confused by such an accusation, partly because Carlos Maria has hinted at being interested in her though an affair is never even broached. Moreover, in the middle of her reaction, the novel shifts from narrating the moment to an examination of the disjunction between Rubião's belief that Sofia is guilty of adultery with her surprise and indignation at being accused of infidelity. This examination begins with the narrator's *representation* of the reader's response at the incongruity of the alleged affair with Sofia's indignation.

...capítulo em que o leitor, desorientado não pode combinar as tristezas de Sofia com a anedota do cocheiro. E pergunta confuso: --- Então a entrevista da Rua da Harmonia, Sofia, Carlos Maria, esse chocalho de rimas sonoras e delinquentes é tudo calúnia? Calúnia do leitor e do Rubião, não do pobre cocheiro, que não proferiu nomes, não chegou sequer a contar uma anedota verdadeira. *É o que terias visto, se lesse com pausa.* Sim, desgraçado, adverte bem que era inverossímil que um homem, indo a uma aventura daquelas, fizesse parar o tálburi diante da casa pactuada. Seria pôr uma testemunha ao crime. *Há entre o céu e a terra muitas mais ruas do que sonha a tua filosofia, -- ruas transversais, onde o tálburi podia ficar esperando.* (198-199; emphasis mine)

Almost sympathetically imagining the reader's disorientation and confusion, the narrator represents a likely response from the reader, asking whether the carriage driver's story about two illicit lovers, a story that seems to prove the affair between Sofia and Carlos Maria, is all a lie. But any traces of textual sympathy for potential readerly difficulties in the face of Sofia's indignant reaction seem to evaporate almost immediately as the narrator

quickly defends the “pobre cocheiro” and blames instead the reader and Rubião. Disclosing that the driver “não proferiu nomes, não chegou sequer a contar uma anedota verdadeira,” an unequivocal piece of information up to this point withheld from the reader, the narrator admonishes the reader, specifically the reader’s reading practice: “É o que terias visto, se lesse com pausa.” Through this interjection, the narrator executes a textual revision *and* a readerly revision, thus marking the mutual relationship between “cotejar,” reconciling, and “emendar,” revising.

I must make clear, however, that the interpretive move that garners such a critique of the reader’s reading practices is everywhere in this novel. Indeed, the characters repeatedly engage in this kind of interpretive indulgence: Dona Tonica assumes that Sofia and Rubião are romantically involved (92-93); Dr. Falcão assumes that Dona Fernanda, Sofia’s friend, and Rubião have a liaison after Dona Fernanda arranges for Rubião to be cared for at a rest home (285); Sofia herself assumes that Carlos Maria is in love with her, though the narrator explains Carlos Maria’s hints as a narcissistic whim (154-157); etc. These interpretive indulgences are exactly why the narrator’s admonishment of the reader’s “interpretation” is so bombastic. The narrator’s forceful emendation of the text and of the reading process points to the opening of a space for contestation between the text and the audience, a space in which the putatively moral content of the admonishment points to the possibility of generating new ethical possibilities. For in the end, it is not the correctness or incorrectness of an extramarital affair or of its supposition by onlookers that Machado’s text underlines but the purposeful asymmetry of the social relations that undergird these kinds of interpretive moves. In short, it is the banal, an/aesthetic customs that Machado’s text discovers, that allow for the intermingling of creativity with a re-evaluation of how things are to make possible what ought to be. By forcefully addressing his imagined reader(s) and reinterpreting the text for the reader(s), Machado’s narrator simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes reading, beckoning and problematizing it, focusing on the asymmetry that inheres in the relationship between narrator and reader and on the role of narrative and readerly choice in the production of meaning. In this way, Machado’s novel stages a struggle for control over meaning between text and audience in which who is Subject and Object, Same and Other, is at stake. The narrator is attempting to construct the audience as subject to his narrative whims, though he is also providing the means by which to resist him. Here again is another way in which the narrator and Rubião are similar: Rubião’s delusions are a means to assert control of his reality just as the narrator displays his control of the narrative. The parallelism between Rubião and the narrator’s emendations show that the use of imagination to reconfigure reality in nineteenth-century Brazil very easily emerges as either a disengagement from the real, a preponderance for tyranny (Rubião, after all, imagines himself as an emperor), or both. Given Machado’s penchant for focusing the reader’s on the construction of meaning, however, it is highly unlikely that readers are to follow the narrator’s and Rubião’s predilection for radically re-writing the world to suit themselves.

The textual revision enacted through the narrator’s interjection introduced above functions in at least two ways, the first of which is that it debunks the expectations the text has built through the withholding of information from the reader and later radically

“clarifying” the matter by explaining that the carriage driver thought Rubião “lascivo, além de pródigo, e encomendeu-lhe as suas prendas. Se falou em Rua da Harmonia foi por sugestão do bairro donde vinham...*Não era razão para que eu cortasse o episódio, ou interrompesse o livro*” (199; emphasis mine). Though the narrator clearly does not contradict himself as he explains away the coincidences and gaps that have created the expectations for an actual affair between Sofia and Carlos Maria (198-199), it is also clear that he attempts to create the expectation of the affair by detailing the certainty of the affair for Rubião and withholding any other evidence since “*não era razão para que [ele] cortasse o episódio, ou interrompesse o livro.*” While the withholding may not prove the narrator’s intentions to rhetorically trap the reader, it is clear that withholding information was purposeful, at least for the purposes of maintaining narrative flow.

The second way in which the narrator’s interjection revises and emends the text is through Rubião. Though Rubião imagines for a while (since he sees Sofia and Carlos Maria dancing) that they are having an affair, immediately after hearing the carriage driver’s “anecdote” Rubião cannot believe that the pair of lovers is Sofia and Carlos Maria (“*Não, não podia ser ela,*” refletiu Rubião (177)). The narrator, however, conflates the moment of Rubião’s acceptance of this “confirmation” with another conspicuous interjection that implicates the reader. After Rubião hears a cicada singing Sofia’s name, the narrator relates:

Oh! Precaução sublime e piedosa da natureza, que põe uma cigarra viva ao pé de vinte formigas mortas, para compensá-las. *Essa reflexão é do leitor. Do Rubião não pode ser. Nem era capaz de aproximar as cousas [sic], e concluir delas --- nem o faria agora que está a chegar ao último botão do colete, todo ouvidos, todo cigarra... Pobres formigas mortas! Ide agora ao vosso Homero gaulês, que vos pague a fama; a cigarra é que se ri, emendando o texto: Vous marchiez? J’en suis fort aise. Eh bien! Mourez maintenant.* (178; emphasis mine)

In this passage, the narrator uses the image of the cicada suggested by its song to construct a metaphor that inverts the traditional fable image of the ants and the cicada: instead of the ants surviving the winter, it is the cicada which stands on the ground with the ants dead at its feet.<sup>10</sup> Reading this metaphor allegorically, a reading buttressed by the cicada’s song apparently being a vocalization of Sofia’s name as well as by the narrator’s assertion that in that moment Rubião was “*todo ouvidos, todo cigarra,*” this moment not only seems to crystallize and seal Rubião’s belief that Sofia is indeed having an affair with Carlos Maria but also heralds the beginning of Rubião’s Napoleonic delusions of grandeur: on the one hand, the cicada with dead ants at its feet as it laughs and emends (*emendando*) the text by saying “*mourez maintenant*” [“die now”] is imperial, Napoleonic; on the other hand, the

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<sup>10</sup> In the United States, the fable indexed here is the fable of the ants and the grasshopper in which the grasshopper plays all summer long while the ants toil and save food for winter. The ants survive the winter with their store of food while the grasshopper perishes.

subsequent miniature chapter relates that immediately after he finishes dressing and goes out to meet his dinner guests “Rubião teve aqui um impulso inexplicável, -- dar-lhes [his guests] a mão a beijar. Reteve-se a tempo, espantado de si próprio” (179). At the moment in which the cicada’s song seems to confirm for Rubião the affair between Sofia and Carlos Maria, he is transformed into the cicada, being “todo cigarra,” laughs and emends the text (“emendando o texto”) adopting the command “mourez maintenant.” As I argue above, Rubião here *does* emend the text of the fable but also radically emends himself by beginning to perform the role of Napoleon III. In the face of this second “betrayal” (the first being unrequited love), Rubião begins to emend himself by holding on to the distant yet stable fantasy, using his imagination and the grandeur associated with Napoleon III to combat the social alienation that Sofia’s refusal and her “betrayal” of him with another constitute. But if Rubião indeed emends himself, this emendation is also the narrator’s conflation of Rubião and the cicada, a conflation in which emendation emerges as a powerful factor in the narrative. Rubião’s own emendation is to alter the text of his own reality, to choose the relatively safe space of delusion in which as the Napoleonic cicada he stands before the twenty dead ants in a gesture of complete authority (authority as a Napoleonic figure and in the authoring of his own story). In imagining the cicada singing Sofia’s name and taking the song as a confirmation of his deepest fears, Rubião misreads the text of the world before him and emends this text, using his imagination to eventually construct a world in which he is supreme ruler as Napoleon and Sofia his Eugenia. The narrator’s emendation, as I have been arguing, occurs at the moment of direct address to the reader, the moment in which he condemns the reader and in which he discloses all those details that were not “razão para que [ele] cortasse o episódio, ou interrompesse o livro.”

Focusing again on the narrator’s criticisms of the reader’s practices, the foreshadowing, indeed beginning, of Rubião’s Napoleonic delusions is a narrative trap: only a second reading of this chapter discloses its importance more fully, only then can the reader understand the narrative trajectory of “se lesse com pausa.” This trap is actually announced by the narrator as he mentions that the construction of the laughing cicada and the dead ants is a “reflexão...do leitor.” Clearly, this assertion cannot be; it is the narrator’s rather fanciful representation of the reader’s interpretation of the preceding “começou a cantar uma cigarra, com tal propriedade e significação” (178), a representation that becomes literalized in Rubião’s movement into delusion first by his “inexplicável impulso” and later by his full-blown delusion of being Napoleon but that had already been introduced in the novel’s first paragraph as Rubião’s “sensação de propriedade” (48). The narrator rhetorically slips this “reflexão...do leitor,” a reflection whose high language disarms the reader by complimenting her for such a poetic construction forming a seemingly stable narrative for Rubião and for the reader to comprehend the development of the characters while pulling the rug out from under both through the interjection. In so doing, the narrator leaves both Rubião and the reader in an interpretive quandary, and, in the specific case of the reader, outright insults or admonishes her for supposedly reading badly or superficially. In a narrative coup, the narrator beguiles, traps, pokes fun, and ultimately returns the reader to a more secure readerly position while at the same time allowing her to enjoy his narrative wit. This enjoyment continues to guarantee the stable

subjective experience of the reader, partly because in making the reader so aware of her own reading process, she also becomes aware of the narrator's slipperiness and rehearses the experience of distinguishing the difference between reality (what the actual evidence presented is), illusion (what the glosses of the evidence are and understanding them as glosses), and delusion (the literalization of the glosses into actual truth). In this way, the narrator transforms rudeness into a signifying trope: breaking the established norms or customs for how narrators do their work—that is, narrate, Machado's narrator discloses and highlights the very mechanisms of representation. The narrator chooses to *refuse* to dissimulate. Unlike Rubião, who does not seem to be able to engage in dissimulation, the narrator's break with the narrative conventions of the novel shows how he can not only dissimulate but also stop from engaging in it. In this way, the narrator projects the alienation that not dissimulating entails, in Rubião's case, toward the reader, acknowledging the break in custom but suggesting that the reader's preconceived notion of reading novels is fundamentally conditioned and potentially flawed.

This work to beguile, trap, and playfully insult the reader generates a critical ethical judgment through the interjections I am discussing. By challenging the reader with the statement, "É o que terias visto, se lesse com pausa," the narrator is engaging in a multi-layered rhetorical strategy: he invents a plausible reaction from the reader that he later condemns, yet such an imagined response as the basis for the narrator's admonishment would not be possible if it were not indeed clear already that the reader had been purposefully steered to agree with Rubião's view of the events before him, as argued above. Though any reader can indeed share in Rubião's beliefs up to the point in the novel in which the narrator discloses the dangers of reading superficially, likewise can any other reader be suspect of Rubião's conclusions. Many points in the novel strongly suggest that Rubião, while kinder and certainly more charitable than most of the other characters in the novel, is rather naïve and that he neither possesses much penetration nor has he been able to discern or read accurately the new social context of Rio de Janeiro for Rubião "nem era capaz de aproximar as cousas [sic], e concluir delas" (178). Indeed, Rubião's move from "cotejar" to "emendar," without realizing how these two are linked, shows his real limitations: Rubião's lack of discernment, of social fact and/or of his social alienation, leads him to an unbridled emendation that results in madness as literal alienation. Any reader who heeds this warning, a warning that comes as Rubião begins to think that there is an affair, will not enter the text as the narrator at this point represents. Whether the reader approaches the text naively or critically, the narrator's promiscuous attribution is likely to significantly alter her perception of the story and her reading mode: for more naïve readers, the adjustment may refract the previous reading work, potentially causing her to reinterpret the entire novel, while at the same time alienate her by showing her that she may be a bad reader; for more critical readers, the adjustment may delight her for rightly having suspected the narrative and constantly weighing the evidence before her, while at the same time it may alienate her from a text that shows contempt for her for something she is not (a poor reader).

Aside from the rhetorical staging the narrator produces that focuses on reading and interpretation, it is clear that a greater awareness of reading and interpretation is a major

textual concern by the language itself. By announcing, “é o que terias visto se lesse com pausa,” the narrator is further drawing attention to the issue of reading and the mode of reading. As discussed above, the entire interjection quoted above is staged by a supposition of a “bad” reading that because so readily assumed makes plain that it was entirely plausible. That is, reading up to this point, no matter how slowly, would not obviate the strong possibility that Sofia’s alleged affair is plausible, especially since the reader is aware that Sofia feels flattered by Carlos Maria’s flirtation on at least one occasion. But in using words like “visto” and “lesse,” the text confirms its preoccupation with seeing, reading, and interpreting well, all words conceptually linked to reconciling and emending. Such rhetorical layering clearly marks the space of reading and interpretation at the center of the interjection and points to the availability of different modes of reading and the different consequences for these modes.

In doing this work, the narrator also reasserts his control of the text. This move highlights the ethical difficulties that inhere in a narrator-reader relationship whose familiar use of addressing the reader, especially using the second person singular “tu,” which was used in Brazil during Machado’s lifetime as commonly as this form is used today in both Iberian Portuguese and most forms of Spanish, suggests a friendly relationship that is revealed to be, at the very least, autocratic.<sup>11</sup> Now, such are the actual parameters of most narrator-reader relationships: no matter how at ease, familiar, beguiling, etc., the narrator stages the communicative situation between text and reader, the text has already been written. The narrator tells his or her story only in one way, no matter how ambiguously the writer has produced the narrative voice and/or the writing. But novelistic narrators tend to resort to rhetorical strategies that promote or encourage the reader’s continued attention and often mask their rhetorical work in the process. In *Quincas Borba*, Machado’s narrator establishes a conversational tone and disrupts it through the textual revision I have been discussing. The narrator represents a friendship with his narratee – the “leitor/a” he addresses. But the narratee, through this revision, is branded a foolish “desgraçado,” which reveals the imagined, false intimacy between the text and its readers. Whereas the narrator represents the reader, through the narratee, as an Other that is being encountered ethically, whose intellect and subjectivity are being regarded as valid, perhaps even as on par with the narrator’s, the narrator highlights how the encounter is truly asymmetrical: the narrator brings to the forefront that the reader is at the whims of the narrator, just as Rubião is at the whims of his “friends” in Rio.

My point is that the textual and readerly revisions performed through this “scandalous” interjection are sudden and jerky, potentially creating for readers an affective response of alienation, one that is likely to make the reader aware of her own reading practice precisely because the criticism leveled at her is one lodged at her reading mode.

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<sup>11</sup> Roberto Schwarz unambiguously warns us that, despite all appearances, Machado’s narrators are fully in control of their narratives (24). Machado constructs these narrators as characters with the skill to generate the feeling that readers have a say in the narrative, which does not preclude Machado from also making the reader aware of the narrators’ strategies.

For me, the ultimate implication for this rather intense focus on a reading mode leads to the rehearsing of ethical judgment through the imagination. In every chapter, I have pointed out that I consider the process of aesthetic judgment, as defined in Kant's *Third Critique of Judgment*, as parallel to political *and* ethical judgment. Aesthetic, political, and ethical judgments are separate but related, always implicated in each other. As Machado's narrator highlights the act of reading itself through textual emendations, the reader's discernment of aesthetic *and* ethical choice enters into play. This is an issue that the narrator obviously calls attention to in his citation, emendation, and addition to *Hamlet*. The narrator's quoting of Hamlet<sup>12</sup> at the end of the interjection I have been discussing, "Há entre o céu e a terra muitas mais ruas do que sonha a tua filosofia, -- ruas transversais, onde o tálburi podia ficar esperando" (199), underlines the potential for myriad possibilities as to where the carriage could have been placed in the driver's anecdote. This potentiality itself already points to choice, a narratorial and a readerly choice, not only because of where the carriage could have waited but also because of the "ruas transversais," neighboring or crossing streets but also open avenues for the imagination in a transversal or non-hierarchical structure. This rich and complex work that the narrator puts into motion through an interjection that emends and cites (and emends a citation, changing "things," in Shakespeare, into streets) describes irony. For the narrator produces a story that on the one hand presents a certain meaning or interpretation of the story while later radically revising that previously established meaning. However, even when it is most glaring, as in sarcasm, irony is not as forceful and autocratic as *Quincas Borba's* narrator. The narrator, then, keeps the mode and flexibility of (re)presentation in view for the reader and thereby announces simultaneously his unreliability through the intrinsically rhetorical aspects of narration, creating for the reader both a stable world with fixed coordinates while at the same time revising those coordinates and denouncing the contingencies of that supposedly stable world. This play with representation is why writing that attempts to "hold the mirror up to nature," as it were, usually leads us to ethics. In other words, at the level of transmission and reception, but not of plot, the narrative often conspicuously reorients itself, bringing to the fore the significance of *choosing* both for narrator and readers in the ethical plane, as narrator and readers cannot choose the facticity of the plot but the meaning of the aesthetic work and the ethical dimensions of those meanings. By extension, this (re)presentation of narrative choice suggests the possibility of readerly choice, of the possibility of "aesthetic play" for the reader through the flexing of both her aesthetic and critical ethical judgment.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Shakespearean text reads: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." (*Hamlet* I.v.166-167)

<sup>13</sup> My understanding of aesthetic judgment draws from Immanuel Kant's *Third Critique of Judgment*. For Kant, "in the judgment of taste nothing is postulated but [a] a *universal voice*, in respect of the satisfaction without the intervention of concepts, and thus the *possibility* of an aesthetical judgment that can, at the same time, be regarded as valid for everyone. The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* the agreement of everyone...; it only *imputes* this agreement to everyone...The universal voice is, therefore, only an idea...Of a relation based on no concept (like the relation of the representative powers to a cognitive faculty in general), no other consciousness is possible than that through the sensation of the effect,



The importance of this interjection, then, is the way in which, by foregrounding the narrative work and potentially opening up a space for contestation between the narrator and the reader, this moment can usefully provide a new way to read or re-constellate the entire work. As I have been arguing, the narrator's work can occasion the reader's critical ethical labor. It is a moment first experienced affectively by means of the narrator's interjection, his admonition to the reader. The reader's response to being called a "desgraçado," in turn, may lead to reflection. Such reflection will also include a moment in which the reader's awareness of the narrator's virtuoso narratorial play seems to involve movement and stoppage, stoppage and movement. At such a moment, the coordinates that assemble the constellation of the novel are made immanent and so does the possibility of rearranging these ethical coordinates. Through his narrative work, the narrator emends the primary moment of the conflation of Rubião and the cicada. Moreover, the parallel between the cicada and Rubião resignifies<sup>14</sup> these inverted versions so that instead of an allegorical moral reading of the cicada and the ants, a particular and discreet metaphor for Rubião emerges, one that Rubião attempts to literalize through his imagination by thinking of himself as Napoleon. The interjection supplements – adds to *and* attempts to replace – this image of Rubião and the cicada with the textual and readerly revisions I have been discussing. These superimpositions of tensions upon tensions on each other, for me, suggest that the moment of the singing cicada as well as the narrator's interjection are important coordinates through which the ethical potentialities of the entire text can be examined.

### Illusion and Delusion at Play

I have already discussed the scene in which the cicada seems to sing Sofia's name for Rubião, a scene that is followed by Rubião's inexplicable impulse to have his dinner guests kiss his hand – a prelude to his Napoleonic delusions (179). For me, this scene is not only the relational pair of the narrator's interjection but also, now stressing the narrator's admonishment "se lesse com pausa," points to Rubião's reading and narrative styles. Though the narrator's interjection to read carefully is moot for the carriage driver's anecdote, particularly as the narrator manipulates at least the reader to consider it, the

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which consists in the more lively play of both mental powers (the imagination and the understanding) when animated by mutual agreement" (379-380; emphases are Kant's).

<sup>14</sup> By resignification, I mean a layering of meanings and stories similar to Luiz Costa Lima's reading of "O alienista" in his "O palimpsesto de Itaguaí." Examining the layered "sub-estórias" in "O alienista," Costa Lima proposes that "Machado era um criador de palimpsestos...Supomos então haver em Machado uma verdadeira política do texto, consistente em compor um texto 'segundo,' capaz de interessar a seus leitores pelo casticismo da linguagem, seus polidos torneios, seus personagens de pequenos vícios e aparência inofensiva. Sob este, eram deixadas as marcas de um texto "primeiro," que a impressão antes cobria que revelava" (27). For me, the paired scenes of the cicada and the narratorial interjection suggest important coordinates that make immanent a constellation in which reading is one of the most central aspects of *Quincas Borba*.

admonishment becomes especially poignant in relation to the letter to Carlos Maria with which Rubião confronts Sofia. The powerful critique is self-evident even before the narrator makes it explicit: caught up in his fanciful imaginings about the nature of Sofia and Carlos Maria's relationship, Rubião *refuses* to read the letter that proves for him the existence of the affair! Though he knows that “se abrisse a carta saberia tudo...Lida e queimada, niguém mais conheceria o texto, ao passo que *ele teria acabado por uma vez com essa terrível fascinação que o fazia pensar ao pé daquele abismo de opróbrios*” (187; emphasis mine), Rubião instead chooses to return it in person to Sofia. As the story progresses, but particularly after the scene with the cicada's song, Rubião increasingly chooses his exuberant and ungrounded imaginings in order to best judge his course of action rather than using and judging reliable evidence, rather than carefully testing reality. Indeed, in his ire, Rubião stands “no meio da sala, com os olhos no tapete, em cuja trama figura um turco indolente, cachimbo na boca, olhando para o Bósforo...” (187). Angered by the apparent confirmation that Sofia would choose a lover other than him (who had already confessed his love for her), Rubião concentrates on the exotic image of a “turco indolente” on his carpet and to the phrase “Infernal carta!...repetindo uma frase ouvida no teatro; frase esquecida, que vinha agora exprimir a analogia moral do espetáculo e do espectador” (187). My point is that the text continually represents instances in which Rubião finds himself in the space of contestation or aesthetic play, such as the carpet or the half-remembered line from the theater, which is the representation of the space the narrator's interjection prompts the reader of the novel to experience. Rubião constantly engages this space badly not because of his delirious imagination but because he does not complement imagination with objective facts. That is, if the letter (or the carpet, or the theater line, or anything else that evokes representation itself) has the potential to be an open signifier to be filled with Rubião's suppositions, it also offers the means by which he can “close” his imaginative play through its materiality. In the specific case of the letter, Rubião need only open it and read it; in any other art object, its artificiality should be enough to lead him back to its already completed – not open – materiality. Rubião, however, does not temper the open space of imagination – illusion – with objectivity; instead, remaining in illusion, the illusion becomes a delusion. Either uninterested in or lacking the means to fall back into reality, Rubião's imagination takes over, furnishing for him a world where he fulfills his deepest desires: as a magnanimous Napoleon, he has the respect of the entire world and the adoration of Sofia/Josephine.

In this way, Rubião functions very similarly to Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. Indeed, Rubião's madness is characterized by his retreat into, and performance of, subjectivity unrestrained by social fact, a gesture similar to that of Don Quijote.<sup>15</sup> Don Quijote, for all his madness however, attempts to heal the world by using novels of chivalry and chivalric poetry and, thus, by using the values of honor and integrity championed—and made suspect—by those works. Machado's innovation on his literary forbear, the uniquely

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<sup>15</sup> Passos importantly highlights the Renaissance intertexts repeatedly, namely the resemblances of Hamlet and Don Quijote in Rubião (162, 167, 170). My own reading is that Rubião is a modern, imaginative yet limited version of Don Quijote, who is the worse for living in an even crueler world than Don Quijote's.

Brazilian component, is that Rubião is attempting to heal himself. This fact, however, does not take away from Rubião what we, perhaps nostalgically and generously, grant to Don Quijote and his madness: the use of his imagination to radically restore the world. It is clear that Machado does not present Rubião as a character with whom to identify, perhaps not even a character for whom to have much sympathy. But the frequent references to Don Quijote cannot but help register a wish for the remaking of the world. But Machado will not provide a vision of that world, nor is he interested in such a project. Machado is as disinterested in origins, in marking an originary moment that determines his characters' outcomes, as he is in being a prophet. What he is interested in is how the literary text stages and generates critique.

## Chapter 4

### Customs and the Problem of Origins in *The Scarlet Letter*

There was always a prophetic instinct, a low whisper in my ear, that, within no long period, and whenever a new change of custom should be essential to my good, a change would come.  
—Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Custom House”

#### Change as Return: The Abolition of Custom in “The Custom House” and *The Scarlet Letter*

In the middle of the “introductory” to his *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne writes that he always knew that his time as the Surveyor of the Revenue at the Salem custom house would be transitory. This instinct, figured as a low whisper, may have always been there, yet it does not prevent Hawthorne from feeling a certain dread at the possibility of staying there forever, of becoming “gray and decrepit” as the officers who inhabit the custom house (32). In this way, Hawthorne draws our attention to one of the key features of “The Custom House” and *The Scarlet Letter*: an uneasiness regarding place and ancestors, regarding the customs of the past and their manifestation in the present. This restlessness about place, ancestors, and customs can be tracked down to the very use of the word “instinct.” In the above quote, instinct is presented as something positive, since it will be that low whisper which will save Hawthorne from the custom house, from the office of a lowly bureaucrat, from a space that time and again he describes as decaying. But instincts, then and now, are open ended, potentially leading to positive and negative outcomes. In *The Scarlet Letter* in particular, the multivalence of instinct, as most other signs or figures in the text, is notoriously indeterminate. In the quote above, instinct is a savior, a prophet who guarantees a change “whenever a new change of custom should be essential.” However, in “The Custom House” itself, Hawthorne, in describing the Inspector, notes that “he possessed no power of thought, no depth of feeling...nothing, in short, but a few commonplace instincts”; he goes on to state that the Inspector does not even have a soul, only instincts (17). Instincts, then, are biological, primal, what is left over in that organism, the animal, with no higher consciousness at the same time that they are prophetic saviors. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the multiplicity of instincts are only expanded, particularly in the passages that feature Hester Prynne’s daughter. Through Pearl, instinct is represented as freakish: Pearl goes about dressed in luxurious crimson dresses screaming at ministers and divining the true nature of characters, a force that not even her mother can tame (63). But it is in her link to nature and the wilderness that she is most represented as a protean instinct: as a neo-Snow White who even a wolf recognizes as part of nature, Pearl seems to be, for most of the novel, as the personification of the wilderness (131). And for Hawthorne, though not for his Puritan forbears, the wilderness is both a source of goodness and beauty as well as for darkness and evil.<sup>1</sup> Pearl is unmistakably the

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<sup>1</sup> In his seminal *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson argues for nature as a sign that is both signifier and signified (1714-1721); natural facts, for Emerson, are evidence for important spiritual facts (1708-1710). Though Emerson does not particularly engage with the

living, speaking, moving sign<sup>2</sup> for Hester and her father's, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale's, shame—"the scarlet letter endowed with life!" (69)—as well as the potential for goodness. In the above quote, however, instinct and change—a change in *custom*—are both positive; the change here, the return to writing, will save Hawthorne from decay, the decay of the custom house and its denizens as well as the decay that being a civil servant represents for him. A change in custom will return him to his proper station as a writer. But, paradoxically, this "change in custom" also entails a *return*. Though *The Scarlet Letter* will often and admiringly represent the transgression of social customs and law, even poking fun at the apparent duplicity in the early colonial world of the novel, the end of the novel seems to be an inevitable return, specifically of Hester's return to Boston *and* to wearing the scarlet A that causes her so much suffering through most of the text. In other words, the narrative seems to be as much about a change in custom, and praise of that change, as a well as a *return* to a custom, wearing the scarlet letter, and the rewards of such a return. After all, Hawthorne tells us that Hester's later life consisted of being a "kind of voluntary nurse" and a source of "advice in all matters, especially those of the heart" (27). He further states that "she gained from many people the reverence due to an angel," according to the packet information in which he learns about her life (27). Of course, *he imagines* that others might have regarded her as "an intruder and a nuisance" (27). Regardless of his wry opinion, it is clear, in "The Custom House" and at the end of the novel, that Hester's neighbors consider her return and wearing of the scarlet letter as something positive. It is a paradoxical outcome given, as I point out above, that Hester's A functions as a badge of shame and a constant source of pain for her. In the end, both the old customs and the new changes are indeterminate and unfinished: Hawthorne presents us with dread, even horror, at decay, ancestors, and places that have an unwanted force upon him (10), while at the same time suggesting a conservative future, a future that seems to preserve old customs despite the textual unease with origins.

"The Custom House" is no mere novelistic introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*: it is a theoretical tract that euphemistically introduces the problems the novel itself later explores. Along with a pervading anxiety over anxiety and place, the beginning of "The Custom House" sets up relationships between authors/narrators, their texts, and readers. Here Hawthorne suggests that the proper relationship between these three fundamental components of the communicative process involves "not violating the reader's rights or

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corporeality of nature, with nature as such, man and nature are inextricably linked, and nature is both a source for man's inspiration as well as a text he must decipher. Even what at first seems negative in nature can be read for positive, as it only requires a change of perspective. Hawthorne is clearly in dialogue with this foundational Transcendentalist text, but he is also in dialogue with Puritan notions of the colonial wilderness and their locating of the Devil within this wilderness and its denizens, the Native American peoples. Thus, it is not surprising that Hawthorne's representations of nature and Pearl, the new American in the narrative, will be protean and equivocal, potentially good and evil.

<sup>2</sup> For a treatment of the narrative as exactly a novel populated by and about signs, see Millicent Bell's "The Obliquity of Signs: *The Scarlet Letter*" (*The Massachusetts Review* 23.1 (1982): 9-26).

[the author's]" (8). Hawthorne advocates for a relationship in which the author does not disclose all nor is the reader overburdened with the task of understanding the author in his totality. This issue of responsibility is intrinsically tied to the question of origins and place in the narrative. Though concerns regarding the ties between ancestors and descendants and concerns regarding the ties between writers and readers seem to be unrelated, at the center of both these sets of relationships are questions about the importance of origins and "authenticity" to communities and readers alike. Moreover, there are questions regarding not only how the past manifests itself in the present as well as how the present reshapes the past. Put another way, when is it permissible for descendants and readers to sever the ties to those who come before them as progenitors of people and stories. These important theoretical concerns in "The Custom House" do not, however, obviate the fact that many readers, even when they are fully aware of the purpose of the introduction, still wonder about why exactly it takes the particular form of the custom sketch. Even if we focus on the basest explanation for its existence, as a pretext for how Hawthorne came upon the source of the novel (8, 24), it is puzzling why the introduction is so long and so full of details that are mildly, if at all, related to the matter of the novel. Certainly "The Custom House's" own notorious, thematic scarlet A stands for authenticity, as Hawthorne himself announces (8): the introduction presents origins, relationships, and social bonds as problems that are all implicated by the notion of authenticity. This focus on authenticity is no simple literary freak. Though the United States had firmly established itself as a nation and a world power by successfully securing its independence from the United Kingdom through the War of Independence and the War of 1812, the authenticity of the national "American" character, as well as the authenticity of the "American" literary character, was still an issue during the time of New England Transcendentalism and even beyond the resolution of the Civil War in 1865. Writing of his time in Salem, Hawthorne's introduction and novel are as much concerned about the national character as on the indelible marks that place and custom leave on the people of a specific place across time.

"The Custom House's" form as a custom sketch, practiced in the United States most notably by Washington Irving, Herman Melville in some of his *Piazza Tales*, and Hawthorne himself, would seem an ideal literary vehicle for establishing an as-yet undiscovered American character, literary or otherwise. Yet the passage from custom sketch to novel, especially to a romance,<sup>3</sup> suggests completely the opposite: Hawthorne prefers the dialogism of the novel to the preserving function of the custom sketch in order to draw the American character. The language of "The Custom House," and the character sketches

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<sup>3</sup> In the preface to *The House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne will famously make a distinction between romance and novel. Fidelity to reality, according to him, is the organizing feature of the latter, while the former is much more suggestive and interpretive, a literary text that involves a careful and pointed emphasis on expressing the author's creation (2921). *The Scarlet Letter*, written before *The House of Seven Gables*, seems to be exactly the kind of text that Hawthorne has in mind when making this distinction between romance and novel. I do not subscribe to Hawthorne's separation of romance from novel, though I think Hawthorne's emphasis on romance as a text that demands interpretive attention is an important one to keep in mind.

found in it, more than establish this preference. As I have already noted, Hawthorne's portrait of the edifice of the custom house and its officers highlight their decay: its pavement is riddled with grass growing through its cracks and its wharves allowed to "crumble to ruin" (9). The building itself is occupied and frequented by types, a smart young clerk, captains of rusty schooners, outward-bound sailors, but we learn very quickly that these types are mere apparitions of a time already ended who sometimes appear at the custom house. "More frequently...you would discern a row of venerable figures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs...[who were often] asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking together, in voices between speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of almshouses," reports Hawthorne (9). He goes to some pains to write that even though this was a decaying place, he has a "foolish habit to contract a kindness for [people]" (15), and explains that he found pleasure in hearing the old men tell their old stories. What manner of "kindness" he contracts or pleasure he derives is hard to tell, for he immediately reduces these old men to children: "Externally, the jollity of aged men has much in common with the mirth of children; the intellect, any more than a deep sense of humor, has little to do with the matter; it is, with both, a gleam that plays upon the surface, and imparts a cheery and sunny aspect...In one case, however, it is real sunshine; in the other, it more resembles the phosphorescent glow of decaying wood" (15-16). Not only is the building decrepit, its inhabitants are at once childlike and reminiscent of "decaying wood." This is a space of intellectual vacuity whose "cheery and sunny aspect" is not truly cheerful, but a second-order happiness that, as a "phosphorescent glow," is a twisted reflection of the real thing.

Through his description of the character of the place, its people, and their decay, Hawthorne performs the custom sketch, particularly as he paints a social type and person proper to the custom house: the Inspector. According to Hawthorne, the Inspector was an 80-year-old man who was "certainly one of the most wonderful specimens of winter-green that you would be likely to discover in a lifetime's search. With his florid cheek, his compact figure, smartly arrayed in a bright-buttoned blue coat, altogether he seemed—not young, indeed—but a kind of new contrivance of Mother Nature in the shape of man" (16). For Hawthorne, the Inspector is to be enjoyed as an animal, "and there was very little else to look at" (16); indeed, it is this character sketch in which Hawthorne uses the word *instinct* to denote a purely animal, soulless existence I remark on above. "The Custom House" performs quite aptly the role of the custom sketch: it presents a picture of American life that is at once of the present and yet timeless; many of the "inmates" of the custom house, after all, exist in the liminal space of extreme old age: always already approaching death, yet the very routine of going to the Custom House seems to make them permanent, living fixtures (14). They are living embodiments of the past that will not go away, Benjaminian ruins or traces who exceed their function as indices of the past through not only their very existence, but also their continual repetition of stories of the Revolutionary War. As with its characters, "The Custom House" itself attempts to establish a foundation, to mark origins, and to claim for itself authenticity that goes far beyond being an account of how the story of Hester Prynne comes into the light of day. But its form, though not its subject matters and the problems it seeks to address, is wanting for the greater purposes of the novel, just as the edifice and the characters that inhabit it. The conspicuous paralleling of the building

and its inhabitants, particularly the description of the Inspector as a permanent yet animalistic personage, shows not only the quasi-existence, somewhere between “speech and a snore,” of the custom house, but also the insufficiency of the custom sketch as a form. As with the physical custom house, what Hawthorne presents us with in this custom sketch is decay, an old and decrepit people reduced to mere instinct, indeed a place itself, Salem, that binds him to it not by affection but instinct, so much so that he wishes to sever the connection (12-13).<sup>4</sup> To be sure, as befits a custom sketch, there is much wit, irony, and amusement in the story, but the question remains whether these old structures and people constitute the way to the future, a way forward for the nation. The answer is an emphatic no as Hawthorne explains that even his children have been born outside of Salem as a way to undo the instinctual connections to place (13). However, despite this desire to be free from the burdens of place and history, the source material from which the novel emerges is found in the custom house and the very matter of the novel itself is in a deep historical moment of Puritan settlement. Hawthorne attempts to evade custom in preference for a (fictionalized) history that will open the way to the future, though he seems to guarantee the authenticity of such a gesture by pointing to the past and binding himself to a place even as he tries to sever that connection. Thus, he finds an equivocal conservative futurity: as much as he would like, he cannot avoid the instinct for place and customs; his substitution of this instinct and of customs for history generate a double movement of rebelling against custom while at the same time re-inscribing it as history. If Hawthorne posits the abolition of customs, or perhaps their re-generation in ways which are more appropriate to the present, what such an abolition means is ambiguous and ambivalent, for even if we grant that customs can be re-imagined to convey new and different values, it is not clear what exactly the new meanings for old customs are and at what price they might come. If we read Hester’s returning to Boston and wearing the scarlet A again as a kind of individual sacrifice for the sake of future generations specific to the novel, what does it mean that the sacrifice comes from the nuanced subject, as opposed to type, who Hawthorne crafts in *The Scarlet Letter*? In other words, why opt for a form, the novel, populated by subjects, instead of types, whose freedoms are ultimately sacrificed?

In my chapter on *Cecilia Valdés*, I argue that the character Leonardo is not a true subject but rather a representative of his entire class who is sacrificed to safeguard that class. Going to the novel, Hawthorne moves away from a representational approach based on types and instead constructs Hester with a conflicted and even prophetic subjectivity in order to “impersonate” an individual. Her status as an individual and eventual return to

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<sup>4</sup> In “‘The Custom-House,’ *The Scarlet Letter*, and Hawthorne’s Separation from Salem,” John Franzosa casts Hawthorne’s attempts to cut his connections to Salem generally as themes of dependence in the novel that articulate developmental concerns (in the psychological dimension of the psyche, behavior, and child rearing) (57). Indeed, there is a great deal of the language of motherhood throughout the romance. And we can easily see attempts to move away from the birthplace as analogous to child developmental stages that focus on differentiation. I will certainly agree that the novel is about formal (narrative) and national developments and about how place figures prominently within these developments. (More psychoanalysis)



bind herself to the scarlet A fruitfully demonstrates the differences between the character of a custom sketch—a type—and the character of a novel—an exceptional yet representative subject. The custom sketch type is usually one-dimensional and often, like Hawthorne’s Inspector, a caricature of a “class” of social being. In other words, a type is a broad of example of a kind of person that functions as shorthand. However, the protagonist of a novel is crafted to portray different, and even contradictory, aspects of an imagined subjectivity. Indeed, particularly in literature influenced by Romanticism, the task of these characters is often to resolve or face up to the internal conflicts the text sets up. These characters are often presented as either ideal or admirable, a narrative strategy through which the text seeks to sustain readers’ attention by establishing bonds of identification. In this way, the characters are unique yet also representative of a kind of subject that seems to transcend class, place, gender, ethnicity, and race. In other words, they are often crafted to be both particular *and* universal. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is a striking example of a variegated character that does not exist in the custom sketch. In fact, the kinds of internal conflicts that suggest to readers either subjectivity or deep psychology are intensified to a superlative degree so that the character will never “resolve” anything; she must continuously face up to the penetrating vision her outsider status grants while suffer the consequences of being able to guess at or discover others’ secrets. This *continuous yet fixed* aspect of her character is why she is represented as being so particular as to be exceptional, but also representative of a new kind of person.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the generic shift from custom sketch to novel clearly shows a reconfiguration with regard to character development,<sup>6</sup> especially important for the Republican values of the antebellum U.S. and New England notions of American individualism elaborated between 1830 and 1850 by authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Through Hester, Hawthorne puts into a play the conflicts between the individual and society that will be so important in and for U.S. literature through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More importantly, I think, the generic shift offers more than a nuanced approach and representation of character, but also a reconfiguration of the relationship between narrator, text, and the reader/audience. Specifically, this reconfiguration entails a consideration of authors’ and readers’ “rights,” of what is the responsibility of writers to readers and readers to writers.

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<sup>5</sup> I write “person” here, as opposed to woman, since the novel’s attitude toward gender is so vexed. On the one hand, the positive valorization of the Hester-Hutchinson connection is vivid. Yet, the narrator will also remark on how Hester’s new knowledge and experience is out of synch with her gender; in fact, Hester seems to exceed gender itself since the narrator describes her as someone who has ceased being a woman (107).

<sup>6</sup> The remarkable characterization in *The Scarlet Letter* has been noteworthy ever since its publication. *Graham’s Magazine* called Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl as indications of “a firm grasp of individualities” (346). In *The North American Review*, most of the review is dedicated to praising the novel’s characters and, save for Chillingworth, the reviewer writes, “devils and angels are alike beautiful” (140). It is also interesting to note that these early reviewers were much more interested in Dimmesdale, Pearl, and Chillingworth rather than Hester.

Above I note Hawthorne's views regarding the author's responsibility to respect his own and the reader's "rights." What these "rights" are seems difficult to ascertain: given the near past of the Revolutionary War and the contemporaneous debates of women's rights, as well as of the rights of Indians and African Americans (free and slave), suggest that Hawthorne is referring to political and social rights. But given Hawthorne's preference for a "romance" that is interpretative and not immediately, if at all, linked to a political or social cause, any such "hard" rights that we might be discern seem rather speculative. What this question of the author and the reader's rights does suggest are rights to individual freedoms writ large: the rights to his or her own subjectivity, to the imaginative self-fashioning usually ascribed to the American character beginning precisely with Hawthorne's generation. Thus, the generic shift from custom sketch to novel highlights not only an attempt to represent a literary character as having a complex interiority, but also an attempt to seriously consider the readers' engagement with the text as subjects. Of course, in any interaction or encounter there is a built in asymmetry inherent to the communicative relationship; this asymmetry, that does not interestingly enough inhibit communication, can be destabilized by both sender (writer) and receiver (reader/audience). By definition, we understand the sender to be a more active agent and the receiver a more passive one. That is, until we admit that actual subjects inhabit both roles as senders and receivers continuously. The reading situation seems to mask this practical aspect of communication. After all, in the time of reading, the text has already been written, its meaning having already been put into motion by the writer. This fact of the reading situation does not obviate, however, the writer and reader's approaches to writing and reading, respectively. In mentioning author and reader's rights, Hawthorne establishes—and even more so because in passing—that there is a proper way for writers to approach their readers through their writing and for readers to approach the writing, and his preference for creating a romance suggests that the custom sketch is an insufficient ground upon which to stage a proper way for writers and readers to encounter each other. Indeed, the flatness of the characters in the custom sketch cannot but overdetermine the readers' interpretation; how could readers resist the Inspector's characterization as an animal? The ambiguity attendant to the romance, and the novel more generally, will make available a variety of meanings with which readers will have to wrestle. Hawthorne wants writers to generate enough suggestive and interpretative material to fire readers' imaginations while at the same time protecting himself as a writer. Readers must distinguish between the writer and the narrator and not seek to delve into the writer's life. That is, readers should not overinterpret the text. Specifically, he wants to safeguard his own life, his own self, from the prying eyes and gossip of readers. But this "prying" is but a species of over-reading: it is the reader's imagination and willful desire to know unbound, without limits and concerns, without responsibility. The representative figure for this kind of aggressive, readerly approach in *The Scarlet Letter* is Roger Chillingworth, whose crime is not overreading but rather reading *too well*, seeing quite methodically and accurately into what lies beneath the sign. The protection of the writer's, and through him of writing, is paramount here. But what to make of the reader's rights? Though we might logically pair Hester off with the Reverend Dimmesdale, as they are co-authors of their social demise and of Pearl, there is a reason why the original pair in the novel is Hester and Chillingworth. If Chillingworth is a master, active reader, Hester is the master artist whose relationship to

her own art is vexed and therefore generates too many meaning through her art. Hester brings forth Pearl and sews the marvelously overwrought scarlet A that she wears, but both of these productions are not symbols but signs, which explains why their meanings are so ambiguous and indeterminate. These are relationships and tasks that the custom sketch as a genre would be hard pressed to achieve.

If we note an aggressive reader as well as an uncontrolled writer, we must also admit the other extremes: an overly aggressive writer and an overly passive reader. If there is one of each to be found in the novel, the narrator himself would seem to come closest to the role of controlling narrator while the overly passive reader would be the Reverend Dimmesdale. In either case of the overly controlling writer and the overly aggressive reader, the problem is not just one of style but one of subjectivity, particularly as both of these procedures would be tyrannical. In other words, each approach seeks to overtake the subjectivity of one agent with its own. The over controlling writer seeks to trap the reader and bend her subjectivity to the dictates of his sign, and the overly aggressive reader attempts to re-form the writer's work into her own imaginative and/or social construct. In either situation, the co-production between writer and reader that Hawthorne imagines does not exist. Instead, there is an imposition of one kind of subjectivity over another. But the question does not end there: each of these overactive figures would seem to co-opt the intersubjective link the communicative situation makes possible in order to stage her own domination. In this way, the issue of author and reader's rights that Hawthorne briefly touches on encapsulates not only what is represented in *The Scarlet Letter's* plot but also what is at stake at an ethico-theoretical level. On the one hand, the writer-reader relationship is sought after, but, on the other hand, it must be a proper type of relationship lest it compromise the subjectivity of either or both writer and reader.

### Indeterminate Readings, Inalienable Rights

In *The Scarlet Letter*, this formal issue of subjectivity, and the pitfalls of intersubjectivity, emerges out of the different representations of point of view. Like "The Custom House," the novel employs a third-person narration. But the ways in which the novel's narrator deploys point of view is quite different from the Hawthorne-narrator of the introduction. Certainly both narrators use the third person, but in "The Custom House" the narrator crafts the text and provides the interpretation of the setting and the types he describes. After all, describing the Inspector's fondness for the sensual, especially eating, is one thing; claiming that this quality makes him a soulless animal is quite another thing, an interpretive maneuver disguised as description. *The Scarlet Letter's* narrator is every bit as penetrating as the Hawthorne-narrator of "The Custom House," but he notoriously will not resolve the indeterminate quality of his text by making definitive conclusions. *The Scarlet Letter's* representation and interpretation of the characters' inner thoughts and feelings expose them entirely to the reader, but what the reader concludes and how she arrives at this conclusion is left for her to decide.

The narrator offers different points of view in the novel despite maintaining a third-person narration. He does so by representing the community's different reactions at key

moments of the text as well as by using verbal moods to offer a variety of interpretations. Indeed, the narrator's use of mood will make itself felt usually in his description, while the introduction of dialogue or reports of the Puritan community's members' thoughts stages different ways of interpreting the plot he is recounting. At times, the imagined Puritan audience almost seems to be representations of readers: different characters will provide opposing viewpoints provoked by the narrated events. In this way, a story told essentially from a single point of view introduces different readings of Hester and the scarlet A that the narrator would not himself own. The importance of these different points of view lies exactly in the ways in which these readings represent different subjectivities and how these subjects form or fail to form an intersubjective link. What is at stake, then, is not how or why the text is indeterminate but how this indeterminacy indexes the different writer-reader relationships the text explores.

One way in which the text investigates different writer-reader relationships is by representing varied points of view through dialogue. An important example of the ways in which the narrator employs dialogue is the crowd's reaction to the scarlet letter itself. As Hester emerges from prison for the crime of committing adultery at the beginning of the novel, the narrator begins by representing the restlessness and anticipation of those waiting for the spectacle of shame that they are about to witness. The women in the crowd, in particular, are absorbed by what is about to transpire; the salient feature of the women's exchanges is their severity, a quality that the narrator suggests is due to their close generational proximity, as immigrants, from Old England.<sup>7</sup> The first instance of dialogue in the novel belongs to a matron who states that women should be in charge of women's crimes in the colony, and two women agree, one saying that Hester should be branded instead of wearing the scarlet A while another recommending the death penalty (39). Curiously, it is a young woman and a male spectator who object to the severity of the severity of these punishments (39).<sup>8</sup> As a plot device, these comments generate the reader's desire to discover both the crime and the character that has committed it; though

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<sup>7</sup> The narrator famously explains that during the settlement period, America has not yet refined the corpulent, ruddy, and formidable English women. Whether a quip or accusation, he notes that these women are of the same ilk as "the man-like" Elizabeth I. Thus, he suggests that they are in some ways out of the norm of the American variety of the gender (38).

<sup>8</sup> Treatments of gender in *The Scarlet Letter* are rich and varied, partly because of the often-contradictory representations of gender in the novel and because of Hawthorne's notorious comment about the "d---d scribbling women" with whom he competed for an audience. In "Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism," Nina Baym catalogues the different type of gender approaches (traditionalist, masculinity studies, and gay/queer studies) that responded to her initial claims that *The Scarlet Letter* is about Hester, not Dimmesdale, and that Hawthorne is a feminist. In her article, despite acknowledging that feminist Hawthorne scholars, as a class, disagree with her interpretation of Hawthorne as a feminist, she continues to argue that Hawthorne is a feminist but an incremental one who could "imagine—and he does imagine [changes]—[that] are palliative and far from romantic" (54).

the represented audience and the one outside the text do not have the same information as to the situation, the narrator seeks to create a parallel between them. At the very least, the representation of the spectators' reactions provides different modes for understanding the events that are about to take place, exhibiting Hester and Pearl as objects of shame, and what has led to this situation. It is true that at this moment the different points of view the spectators offer are matters of degree: in their eyes, Hester has become the embodied sign of sin and criminality. However, as the text develops, Hester and her A's meanings proliferate, sometimes even overriding the intended signification of the A.

The presentation of the A itself is singular, hypnotic. Indeed, when the crowd first sees the letter, all are intent upon it, attached to the breast of Hester's gown "in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread...It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel she wore" (40). Though the letter suits the taste of the age, according to the narrator, it exceeds the sumptuary laws of the colony (40). Hester, in effect, fashions what would be a badge of shame into one of honor by turning it into an aesthetic object. The embroidery has a reciprocal effect on *her* as it "transfigured the wearer...It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (41). The immediate effect is astounding in many levels: the letter seems to turn Hester into art herself and, simultaneously, becomes a permanent mark of her artistic skill (41). Indeed, the narrator later remarks that the scarlet letter functions as proof of this skill, which enables her to survive through her art and labor (57). Thus, almost from the outset, the ostensible signification for adultery of the A begins to shift to advertisement; Hester's A will later also mean able, as Hester's silent usefulness in her community is recognized by those around her, and even function "as a cross on a nun's bosom" and a token of sacredness (106). The effect of the A, as noted above, has the most important consequences for its wearer, of course. Upon her emergence from the prison door, Hester, instead of downcast, emerges almost triumphant, "with a burning blush, yet haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed" (40). Her beauty is remarkable, so much so that in her ignominy her beauty makes her "more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term" than ever before (40). Indeed, those who knew her, expecting "to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out" (40). It is as if her crime has *returned* her to a pre-American, *aristocratic* tradition that cannot be ignored, while at the same time this crime, this exceptionality, destroys any notion of hierarchical rank. Hester, thus, stands as a kind of representative of a rarified, beautiful quality that refuses to submit to the opinion of those around her yet acquiesces to worldly power.

Of course, though Hester's own A is irrevocably fixed upon her breast, the narrative is riddled with A's, suggesting not only the unbounded quality of the A itself, of its meanings and its locations. Putting aside the narrator's association of the scarlet letter with Pearl, who the text offers as the very vivification of the scarlet letter, the A will appear quite spectacularly in at least two other important moments: the appearance of the letter A in the night sky as well as the appearance of the letter A upon Dimmesdale's breast. The first of

these moments is when the Reverend Dimmesdale eventually stands upon the scaffold at the market place with Hester and Pearl during the middle of the night years after the scene at the prison house door (99-104). It is upon their chance meeting and their reunion together upon the scaffold, a deferred confession of their mutual sin—though one with but one witness (Chillingworth), that the letter will manifest in the sky, turning night into day, “marked out in dull red light” (102). That is, the letter appears in the sky only if we choose to occupy Dimmesdale’s point of view; it does not appear, however, if we heed the narrator’s statements that Dimmesdale interprets the astronomical phenomenon due “to the disease in his own eye and heart” (102). As with the A on Hester’s chest, this A, if it exists, is also equivocal as to its true meaning: the narrator calls into question the very appearance of the A in the night sky. It is not until the next day that the manifestation of the A is confirmed for both Dimmesdale and reader, though with its own reader-imposed treatment. The sexton recovers Dimmesdale’s own glove from the scaffold and gives it back to him, supposing that it came there through Satan’s agency to ridicule Dimmesdale (104). He also informs the Dimmesdale of the red A, which the community reads as “angel” as a heavenly acknowledgement of Gov. Winthrop’s death that very night (104). In this instance, the two most important characteristics of the A are surely not what it *means*, but rather that it is mobile both in meaning and location.

The second telltale moment occurs at the very end of the narrative when Dimmesdale acknowledges the true nature of his connection to Hester and Pearl. In this uncharacteristic moment of bravery, Dimmesdale not only acknowledges Hester and Pearl, but also tears “away the ministerial band from before his breast” (161). He quickly expires, but the narrator will, predictably, not describe what was upon his breast. Throughout the narrative, the text suggests that there is something on his chest by repeating Dimmesdale’s habit of holding his hand upon his heart and describing the ecstasy Chillingworth feels when he finally sees the Reverend’s bare breast (92). But whatever is on his chest is never described, not even at the final moment of Dimmesdale’s own self-revelation. What the narrator does provide, however, is the report of others’ observations: “Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER—the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne—imprinted in the flesh...It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons...[who] professed never once to have removed their eyes from [him], denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast” (162-163). Even at the moment in which the novel is supposed to disclose its secrets, it does not, calling into question the very facticity of what transpires upon the scaffold. If one is inclined to believe that there was a scarlet letter upon Dimmesdale’s breast, the text provide three distinct interpretations: that the Reverend carved an A on his breast as penance, that Chillingworth caused it to appear through necromancy, and that remorse and “Heaven’s dreadful judgment” made it appear (162-163). In the face of this multiplicity of reasons for the latter—or the complete absence of it, the narrator washes his hand clean of determining a real explanation: “The reader may choose among these theories. We have thrown all the light we could acquire upon the portent, and would gladly...erase its deep print out of our own brain” (163). The narrator’s reaction to this event is to falsely state that he has done whatever he can to provide “light” upon the matter, and interestingly, that he wishes to “erase its deep print” from his mind. Again, what we can really establish in this

scene is both the A's mobility as well as its multiplicity of meanings. The narrator suggests that the scarlet letter has been carrying out an office for Hester, Dimmesdale, and even himself. If, likewise, the letters is having an effect upon the reader, it is surely not having to do with what the letter means: the adultery plot so frequent in novels is revealed, in this particular novel, as very banal indeed, so much so because it is not at all in question. The reader is not absorbed, if at all, by what the true nature of Hester and Dimmesdale's relationship may be. What is working upon the reader is not the meanings and places of the A but rather why the underlying characteristic of both is movement.

These two episodes represent the narrator's method of developing the plot: he describes an event while layering the meaning of that event by attributing it to someone else. However, as the narrator makes this kind of attribution, he also deauthorizes the interpretation by either pointing out the superstition of the age (101), the "disease" of the reader (Dimmesdale), or the conflicting points of view or interpretations of the witnesses. What happens is often, but not always, corroborated—the sexton confirms the appearance of the A in the night sky, but its presence upon Dimmesdale's breast is undone. The meaning of the A and all other signs in this novel, however, will never be truly clear since the text offers competing yet simultaneously plausible interpretations: adultery and angel, in the case of the night sky. Certainly Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl, as the product of an extra-marital affair, are all within the circle of adultery. Yet, they are all also offered as earthly angels of some kind: Hester's ministrations to the poor and sick, the minister's faith and attention to his flock, and Pearl's characterization as a wild eruption of joy all point to their undeniable goodness. Of course, this goodness, it is clear, is an earthly one, one in which the word angel is semantically broad in a way that would not have made sense in the settlement era of the novel but would make sense in the nineteenth century, particularly after the advent of Romanticism. In the case of Dimmesdale's confession, the sign itself is in question, yet if we agree that it is there, all three explanations for why it is there ring true: Hawthorne's play with Catholic images and concepts more than suggest bodily penance, his characterization of Chillingworth as devilish and as conversant in Western as well as Native American knowledge and medicine, and the force of Dimmesdale's guilt all point to the plausibility of these theories taken singly or together. At this point in the narrative, however, whether the A is there or not seems not to matter: Dimmesdale's confession more than suffices to fill in the indeterminacy of the sign. Indeed, it renders the need for signs, portents, and interpretations obsolete: there is no mistaking that he is Pearl's father. In terms of plot, the shared "sin" here becomes transparent not for the reader, whose knowledge is the affair is a given, but for the community. That is, unless the view of "certain persons" erase not only the presence of the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's chest as well as his confession. The importance of this scene is not its revelation of Pearl's father but rather the revelation of how the community may *choose* to interpret the events. In giving the reader three possible reasons for why the letter came to be upon Dimmesdale's breast, if it did, the narrator foregrounds for the reader the agency of choosing what and how to interpret. So conspicuously placed at the end of the novel, the narrator's insistence that it is up to readers to choose an interpretation provides an answer for why the text is so constantly, purposefully ambiguous: the narrator, rather than closely guarding a secret, is asking readers to understand the signs and interpretations that have been presented and

represented for themselves. Throughout the text, Hawthorne, by way of the narrator, discloses how choice is inherent in the reading situation. For Hawthorne, proper *American* reading subjects will have to actively participate in the textual enterprise by creating their own narrative not of what happens in the story but *why* the characters and plot develop in the ways they do.

What is at stake in the presentation of competing interpretations of the A is the instability of the narrative's most important symbols. For a permanent feature of the text, even at its very end, is the way in which the narrator will produce different interpretations of the scarlet letter that will mark it as indeterminate and, in so doing, re-inscribe the concern regarding the writer's and the reader's rights in the signifying apparatus of the text. The withholding of a clear, unequivocal interpretation of what transpires and why stages the ways in which the narrator creates a text that safeguards the author's and reader's "rights." The narrator doubles down on novelistic description to the point of creating an enigmatic text that does not explore causation in the ways novels normally do. In so doing, he crafts a suggestive, interpretive world of romance full of signs and symbols—so much so that most of the action has already taken place before the narrative even begins and there is very little plot in the novel. But this also means that this literary product generates the precondition for readers to regard the narrative before them and, if not outright choose, discover the agency in reading as well as writing. Thus, readers' rights are preserved and their activity encouraged but not allowed to go overboard. That is, unless readers consider this kind of symbolic indeterminacy abusive.

### Exceptional Normativity

How does the staging of writers' and readers' rights relate to the represented individual at the center of the novel, Hester? Aside from the different meanings that the A will take in the novel, an implicit yet terminally latent interpretation for this A is, of course, American. As paradoxical as Hester's figure and her treatment in the novel are, they track productively with the contradictions that seem to be inherent to narratives of Americanness: exceptionalism and representativeness. The scene at the prison door and upon the scaffold at the market place irrevocably make Hester and the scarlet letter, as novelistic artifacts, coterminous and difficult to think about separate from each other. This double movement that make Hester and the A both subjective and symbolic are parallel to the exceptionalism and representativeness Hawthorne attempts to create through his romance. The narrator undertakes this double movement by focusing his attention on describing Hester's inner life, as it responds to the bearing of the scarlet letter and the resulting social isolation, to create different iterations of the character that are ultimately puzzling because incongruous. For example, the irreverence evinced by Hester's "haughty smile" when being displayed as a sign of shame for her community sets her up as a kind of heroine. This heroic dimension of her character, at the beginning of the narrative, is a species of rebelliousness that makes her interesting and compelling. As the narrator develops her character, however, this rebelliousness achieves the signifying level of the romance: the allusion to Anne Hutchinson, the so-called antinomian exiled from Massachusetts Bay Colony in (1638) for her non-conformist religious views and her claim for the rights of women to preach, at the



beginning of the novel, by means of referring to the red rosebush (37), is expanded to even more powerful echoes later on. Specifically, the narrator will describe Hester as a kind of saint (already suggested by the red rose bush at the prison door) and as a prophetess and mystic (60). The continual allusion to Hutchinson and the use of Catholic imagery of the “Divine Mother” imply a proto-feminist view of Hester as both a saint and a reformer. Thus, the expansiveness and significance of her character becomes larger than at first we might have surmised. Curiously, the links to Hutchinson and other descriptors form Hester into a symbol, but not a type; instead, the nuance of her character, despite the lofty and perhaps even archetypal echoes, reveal her to be the representation of an individual. I write the representation of an individual purposefully: by individual, I mean to underline her (mostly suggested) unrestrained subjectivity, and by representation, I mean not just diegesis but the elevation of Hester as a *representative* though not in any way typical.

As carefully as she is crafted into an object of admiration, both exceptional and representative, Hester acquiesces to the community’s shame by refusing to leave Boston after her incarceration (55-56). The narrator produces two different accounts of why she might not have left: either a “fatal” attraction to the place of her greatest trauma or her connection to a relation and/or relationship that ties her to the place (56). In the latter case, the connection would seem to be one to Dimmesdale’s, her child’s father. These reasons, separately or taken together, might suffice as an explanation for why she stays in Boston, but they cannot explain her eventual return at the end of the novel, after most of those who knew her have either died or forgotten her. Her return is one glaring plot matter that begs the question why she returns, especially if we are to view her as unconventional and independent as in the beginning of the novel. Even if we believe that she stays in Boston because she is somehow compelled to stay, she does so in rather a meek way. Certainly she does not express her frustrations and pain due to her marginalization to others; for the expression of these sentiments, the text shows how Pearl combats her sense of social alienation at the hands of the Puritan children by throwing stones at them if they approached her (64). Clearly Hester would not herself in such an outlandish manner, but her haughty smile might reasonably suggest some form of protest, beyond the wild fashioning of the scarlet A, that would check the community’s habit of using her as “the text of the discourse” to prevent the proliferation of sin (59). To be sure, the mix of the rebellious and submissive in Hester creates a highly nuanced notion of character, the representation of an individual at odds with herself and lends a keen psychological depth to the crafting of a novelistic character. This is one of the reasons why she could never be the character type of a custom sketch, a flat character wholly defined by one element like the “animalistic” Inspector at the Salem Custom House. However, though this complexity creates a more vivid character, the fact remains that Hester not only submits to her community’s derision, but also voluntarily returns to take up a conventional, if admirable, role. Thus, her rebellion and submission generate a kind of exceptional normativity in which she flaunts her parting with convention and yet delivers herself, time and again, to be punished for such flaunting. Like Hawthorne’s writing instincts, her behavior will effect a change in custom that nevertheless will not only return her to the community’s grip but also strengthen that grip. Through Hester, Hawthorne seems to construct the means by which to approach one version of the American individual, particularly one borne out of

Transcendental New England: a subject whose will is indomitable and who may be radically out of synch with her community but who ultimately strengthens social bonds. From this subject, the notion of the free American individual who champions her own rights and thus expands rights for others seems to emerge. That is, an *exceptional* subject who, though radically different, often becomes the representative for an idea or ideal and thus becomes the representative for the many. Hester's intimate connection with the scarlet letter's unfixed meaning and location, as well as the narrator of "The Custom House's" obsession with authenticity and place, also suggests that a true American character is produced by movement and that too concrete ties may dull the remarkable aspects of this national character, its value *for*—as opposed to actual—independence. Hawthorne's emphasis on place and the languages of adaptation and transplantation that riddle *The Scarlet Letter* posit a world in which transplanting is preferred to fixity and in which adapting to a new environment—or failure to do so—is a sign for surviving and thriving.

### Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, and the entire dissertation, I have been dealing with the central concern of how customs, in either the form of the custom sketch or the representation of manners, enter the world of the novel and how the dialogism between customs and other novelistic discourses structure the novel's meanings. In this last chapter, in particular, I have been animated mostly by the question of what the shift from the custom sketch to the novel, specifically a romance that is virtually without plot, allows Hawthorne to explore. Certainly a lack of plot and a heavy reliance on description, though a description of psychology rather than behavior and social phenomena, as the province of the custom sketch genre is not enough. Instead, the novel allows Hawthorne to imagine a kind of fundamental change in character—or at least represent the potential for such a change—through operations of interpretation that just cannot be effected by the custom sketch. The novel also permits him to reconfigure the relationship between writer, text, and reader and requires each site of communication to demand much more labor. The writer thus produces a suggestive, impressionistic text that does not attempt to state what is true; at the same time, the text provides clear parameters that nevertheless are moveable and open to myriad interpretations; and the reader imagines along with the text and has to decide in a much more individual way what the text's meanings are without running roughshod over the text's signs and the writer's concerns. In this second, but not secondary, matter, I am returning to a discussion of literature and ethics that I take up at different moments of this dissertation. In writing about *Sab* and *Cecilia Valdés*, I write about how literature represents politics (antislavery and Cuban independence) by representing customs while also delineating the ethical implications of the political stances that animate these texts. In *Quincas Borba*, Rubião's inability to adapt himself to courtly manners emphasize social alienation but also a will to create. In its engagement with alienation, *The Scarlet Letter* offers a similar critique by the conspicuous abandonment of the custom sketch for the novel. But *The Scarlet Letter* also helps us consider an important aspect of custom as important as noticing its claim to history while its content is basically ahistorical: I am writing here about the relationship between custom and law. In our day and age, the

connection between the two might seem bizarre, until we notice that the struggle between local laws and national laws only mask the struggle between customs and the law. For local laws are the codified, though often unwritten, amalgamation of local customs that describe a moment in time that later become naturalized and prescriptive. In the Medieval Spanish world we see, for example, the tension between national laws underwritten by a national monarchical authority and *fueros*, local laws derived from generations of tradition. In Britain, we can also observe that the emphasis on precedent attempts to circumscribe laws within accepted practices that have come down through the generations. This tradition of British precedent will dramatically collide with the written national fountain of U.S. law, the Constitution. Within the struggle between national laws and local laws, then, exists the struggle between local customs and national models. *The Scarlet Letter*, in noting that the inhabitants of the time considered that “religion and law were almost identical” (37) and that Governor Bellingham’s power to take Pearl away from Hester stemmed not only from being a political leader but also a patriarch or Puritan leader (68), reveals the strong relationship between custom and law. Though there is a juridical discourse of Christianity, especially in the Catholic Church, I read religious rules as different iterations of customs that have achieved the force of general or worldly law. Thus, in the world of *The Scarlet Letter* custom and law are one and the same. Ecclesiastical and political law are conflated (Korobkin 197); at the time of the writing of the novel, however, ecclesiastical law was already regarded as custom, and spiritual or moral infringements were no longer punishable by law. Indeed, at the beginning of the narrative, the narrator hints that Hester’s crime, in his own age, might garner ridicule but not a prison term, never mind wearing a badge of dishonor (38). Hawthorne’s satirical treatment of the Puritan’s lack of distinction between religious and political law, between custom and political power, shows another relation that he wishes to abolish: the separation of religion or custom from law.

Viewed from this perspective, the dialogism between the custom sketch and the more dynamic discourse of the novel represents the fraught dialogue between the local and the national or universal, between local laws and national laws. *The Scarlet Letter* champions the world of the novel over the custom sketch, a genre that the novel nevertheless cannot seem to escape. This is so partly because the nineteenth-century novel is intimately connected with attempts to imagine a broader national picture or character, even when the novel has problems dealing with the radical differences within the political community. The custom sketch furnishes the novel a national “authenticity” that, paradoxically, is inimical to the expansive, centrifugal movement of the novel. The novel as a whole, then, attempts to circumscribe the custom sketch in order to make it useful for national and nationalist purposes: in the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, the separation between custom and law would produce a juridical world in which tradition, local beliefs, and local associations would not interfere with the implementation of the law. In Hawthorne’s world, this would help him argue for the preservation of his own status and office as the Surveyor of the Salem Custom House, a post that helped Hawthorne provide for his family while at the same time prevented his writing. But the implications would not be specific to Hawthorne: law bereft of the burden of custom would mean a revaluation of law with respect to the abolitionist cause in the United States as well as to the women’s movement. Each movement argued quite convincingly that slavery and women’s limitations were due

to custom, with an established role, that had nothing to do with the aspirational phrase in the Declaration of Independence—the “self-evident truth” that all men are created equal. If the development of American law in 1850 was wrestling with the proper relationship between customs and the law, the same was even more poignantly true of nineteenth-century Cuba and Brazil. Both countries were grappling with the contradictions between liberal philosophies that espoused the rights of man while having deep traditions of ignoring the rights of whole swaths of the population. In Cuba, in particular, the problem was compounded even more as the legal debates around abolitionism within Cuba had to contend with those who backed the republican national assemblies and those who backed the monarchists in Spain as well as the interests of the landed slaveocracy inside Cuba. That is, imagining an independent Cuba meant imagining a legal document that resolved the arguments between liberals and monarchists, protectionist slaveholders and cautious free marketers, those who favored ties with Spain, the United States, or nascent Latin American states. Revising the custom sketch was the equivalent of abandoning traditional beliefs regarding racial slavery and racial hierarchies that were deeply structural, stemming from the colonial structure of society, and culturally and racially chauvinistic. In this way, the story of the custom sketch in the novel stages the inauguration of uniquely American modernities that consciously deviated from their European models while simultaneously attempting to cope with the remainders of European colonialism and Eurocentric notions of universality.

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