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# Foundational Frustrations: Incest and Incompletion in Cirilo Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés

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## **Foundational Frustrations: Incest and Incompletion in Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés***

Thomas Genova

In its canonical 1882 form, Cirilo Villaverde's well-known novel *Cecilia Valdés* tells the story of the illicit relations between the creole aristocrat Leonardo Gamboa and the mulata Cecilia Valdés who, unbeknownst to them both, is his half-sister.<sup>1</sup> The relationship ends in tragedy when Leonardo, after marrying the creole heiress Isabel Illincheta, is murdered by José Dionisio, an Afro-Cuban rival for Cecilia's affections. Through the machinations of Leonardo's mother, doña Rosa, Cecilia is imprisoned for the crime. Yet, while this story has been immortalized in multiple editions and adaptations, most notably Gonzalo Roig's 1932 *zarzuela* and Humberto Solas's 1982 film, in 1839—forty-three years before the definitive text—, Villaverde published two earlier and very different versions of *Cecilia Valdés* that, unfortunately, have not received the scholarly attention that they deserve.<sup>2</sup> The first, penned in response to a friend who asked for a description of the Festival of Saint Rafael in the El Ángel neighborhood of Havana (Croguennec-Massol 1), appeared in two parts as a short story in the magazine *La siempreviva* (Luis 100) and was republished in 1910 by the Editorial Cuba Intelectual under the title "La primitiva *Cecilia Valdés*." The second, a novella, was published, also by Cuba Intelectual, under the title *Cecilia Valdés, o la Loma del Ángel. Tomo I* and has not been reprinted since.

This article explores the evolution of author Cirilo Villaverde's racial republican thinking as it develops through the three *Cecilia Valdés* texts. Contending that—precisely because the incest trope is absent from the 1839 works—an examination of the two earlier versions of the story can shed light on the troubling place of consanguinity in the 1882 novel, I consider the three *Cecilia* texts in light of the genre that theorist Doris Sommer terms "foundational romances," or, works in which marriage between members of opposing factions in the national body acts as an allegory for national consolidation. After situating Villaverde in the context of nineteenth-century Cuban creole reformer Domingo del Monte's antislavery literary *tertulia*, this article explains how the three *Cecilia* texts break with the rules of the transAmerican foundational romance genre through a series of containment devices (most notably, the incest in the 1882 novel) that prevent the narrators from tying up their stories' loose ends. I note that, in all three texts, the narratives' inconclusive natures result in the protagonists' inability to reproduce under circumstances propitious to the founding of the interracial nation—a political dream

deferred whose fruitful realization seemed less and less likely as the nineteenth century progressed. With Villaverde's seeming incapability to bring his interracial romances to a neat, nationally reproductive conclusion in mind, I will argue that the incest in the 1882 *Cecilia* text acts as an intervention into the hemispheric foundational romance genre, rejecting the mid-nineteenth century dream of national consolidation under the creole elite as blind to the racial realities of the New World.

### **The del Monte group**

A deliberate effort to found a national lettered culture,<sup>3</sup> creole reformer Domingo del Monte's antislavery literary *tertulia* occupies a foundational place in Cuban literary history, having produced, in addition to the 1839 versions of *Cecilia Valdés*, such canonical works as Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel's short story "Petrona y Rosalía" (1838), Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1840),<sup>4</sup> and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's novel *Francisco. El Ingenio o las delicias del campo* (1880).<sup>5</sup> Cuba's decision not to join the colonies of the Spanish Main in rebellion against Spain during the first decades of the nineteenth century had been largely a result of the sugar island's dependence on slave labor. Rocked by the Haitian Revolution of 1791 and the 1812 Aponte slave conspiracy on their own island, white Cubans worried that a Spanish withdrawal from the colony would provide the ideal conditions for slave revolt.<sup>6</sup> Frustrated by their country's continued colonial status and feeling that "la falta de libertad política de la Cuba de los criollos blancos era consecuencia directa de la esclavitud en la isla" (Andioc, Vol. 2 xxx), in 1834 Domingo del Monte, a creole intellectual with strong family ties to the plantation elite, founded an antislavery literary salon dedicated to the Cuban nationalist cause. The group, which began by organizing the translation of French antislavery texts (Williams 16), rapidly developed into a forum in which creole liberals could read and discuss antislavery works out of earshot from the colonial censors (Ocasio 63).

Though anticolonial and antislavery in orientation, largely driven by political and economic self-interest, the reforms proposed by the del Monte group were hardly democratic in nature. Importantly, as Salvador Arias notes, "para los aristócratas intelectuales 'antiesclavismo' no significaría igualdad racial" and, in addition to calling for the suppression of the slave trade, "medida que detenía el crecimiento de la población negra y suponía una abolición gradual de la esclavitud," the *tertulianos* promoted the immigration of European workers as a means of whitening the population. More than social justice, the *delmontinos* were interested in cultural, economic, and political modernization broadly construed. Not limiting their efforts to antislavery, members of the del Monte group also sought to "obtener de la Corona el cese del *status* colonial en favor de un régimen autonómico, reorganizar y organizar la agricultura de la caña de azúcar, renovar el transporte y las comunicaciones, erradicar la vagancia y los vicios, promover los estudios científicos y reformar el sistema educativo" (cited in Benítez Rojo 104).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the *tertulia* soon found itself at odds with the Spanish colonial government. The creole reformers enjoyed the backing of the British, who, having abolished slavery in their own colonies, wished to weaken the institution in Cuba in order to reduce competition for West Indian sugar on the global market. The *delmontinos* initially had close ties to Richard Madden, an Irishman working for the British crown

who translated and published several of the Cubans' works, most famously Manzano's *Autobiography*, in London in 1840.<sup>7</sup> According to Sophie Andioc, the group's feelings towards the British government changed when Madden was replaced by the more radical abolitionist David Turnbull (Vol. 3). Perhaps as a result of their connections to British radical abolitionism, in 1844, several members of the del Monte group—including Manzano, Tanco y Bosmeniel, and del Monte himself—were accused, along with Turnbull, of participating in the *Conspiración de la Escalera*, a planned slave uprising in Eastern Cuba, and the group ultimately disbanded, its members forced into either silence or exile.<sup>8</sup>

### 1839: “La primitiva Cecilia Valdés”

While the definitive 1882 *Cecilia Valdés* is frequently lauded as a masterwork of the abolitionist genre,<sup>9</sup> neither of the 1839 versions expresses direct antislavery sentiment, possibly in order to avoid problems from censors in the island colony in which Villaverde still lived (Álvarez García 319; Shulman xvi), or possibly because, as Rodrigo Lazo argues, the author would not adopt anti-slavery ideas until his exile in the United States, after his marriage to Emilia Casanova and his experience of the North American Civil War (175-176).<sup>10</sup> Instead of the realistic depictions of slavery that scholars such as César Leante find in the 1882 edition, the 1839 short story is marked by the Gothic romanticism characteristic of Villaverde's earlier works, such as the short stories “La peña blanca” (1837) and “El ave muerta” (1837) and the novel *El penitente* (1844). Seemingly simple, the short story tells the tale of a young girl of mixed race who enters the home of a strange family that her grandmother cautions her to avoid. Heedless of her grandmother's warnings about strangers, Cecilia begins a relationship with the rich Leocadio Gamboa (renamed Leonardo in subsequent versions of the story):

¡Con este hombre se encontró Cecilia al pisar las puertas de oro del mundo! ¡Cuitada! Semejante a la paloma que sale del nido a ver la luz y las flores, los ríos y los montes, que ensaya sus débiles alas bajo el firmamento vestido de azul y de grana de su tierra nativa, en pos de aire, y la sorprenden en su tránsito los fijos y redondos ojos del milano, abatiendo el vuelo sobre ella para devorarla entre sus garras. (206-07)

Though Villaverde does, in language that will strike a contemporary reader as racist, describe Cecilia as a “mulata medio bruja y medio gente” (185), as this passage—in which Villaverde unselfconsciously inverts Cuba's racialized color schema by metamorphosing the mulata Cecilia as a white dove and the creole Leocadio as a black kite—makes clear, race is not a major factor in the 1839 short story. Rather, in the sensationalist spirit of much nineteenth-century literature, “La primitiva *Cecilia Valdés*” deals with interclass romance and a young girl's lurid “fate worse than death” as she is suggestively “devoured” within the predator's claws. For critic Lucy Harney, the short story's ending represents an eighteenth-century morality tale warning the Cuban elite to take proper care of the colony's lower classes (164): “¡Desgraciada la sociedad que echa el velo en vez del anathema sobre las graves faltas de sus asociados!,” Villaverde excoriates (183). In this moralizing aspect, the text reflects the early associations with enlightenment

thinking of the del Monte group, which had grown out of Cuban chapter of the liberal Sociedad Económica de los Amigos del País.

Imeldo Álvarez García takes this moralizing reading one step further, arguing that Villaverde's gothic vision of Cuba's decadent underbelly constitutes an effort to represent the island's political climate in a way acceptable to the colony's censors. Seeking to create "un tipo de literatura *capaz de circular en el medio colonial*," Villaverde—much like his fellow delmontino Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel in the 1838 short story "Petrona y Rosalía"—uses his sensational tale to present the inner workings of a colonial world that gives creoles the right to use and then disregard Afro-descended bodies (Álvarez García, *Acerca* 319):

Las calles de la ciudad, las plazas, las tabernas, los baratillos, las tiendas de ropas [. . .] fueron su escuela; y en tales lugares, por descontado, su tierno corazón, formado acaso para abrigar todas las virtudes que hermocean la existencia de una mujer buena, recibió las lecciones más pervertidoras, se nutrió con los excesos de lascivia e impudicia que ofrece todos los días un pueblo soez y desmoralizado. (186)<sup>11</sup>

It is in the underdeveloped and dependent economy of "baratillos" and "tiendas de ropas," in the colonial city's streets where a meaningful *res publica* is lacking—not enlightened coffee houses, but debauched "tabernas"—that Cecilia, like the rest of the Cuban "pueblo soez y desmoralizado" becomes exposed to the "lascivia e impudicia" that leads to her mysterious disappearance. The use of the gothic in this nineteenth-century Cuban story of an innocent girl lost in and corrupted by the colonial *demimonde* serves to reveal the incompatibility of the island's institutions with the liberal political and social forms taking root in other parts of the world during the first half of the nineteenth century—the very reforms for which the del Monte group to which Villaverde belonged advocated.<sup>12</sup>

### **1839: Cecilia Valdés, o la Loma del Ángel. Tomo I**

The second 1839 version, a *costumbrista* novella, was published by the Editorial Cuba Intelectual. Prepared for the del Monte tertulia, the novella shares "La primitiva *Cecilia Valdés*'s reticence to express direct abolitionist sentiment (Kutzinski 18, Shulman xxiii).<sup>13</sup> This attitude was not uncommon among the Cuban bourgeoisie of the 1830s, which "sigue siendo partidaria del mantenimiento de la esclavitud, pero ya no desea que subsista la trata. La burguesía comercial española, sin embargo, ve en la supresión de la trata la pérdida de un suculento negocio. Se trenzan, pues, más a fondo, las contradicciones entre la colonia y la metrópoli" (Álvarez García, *Acerca* 312). Thus, while calls for full abolition were a rarity in delmontean texts, the simple denunciation of slavery as a sign of Cuba's moral debasement under Spanish colonialism was a central theme, as works such as Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel's "Petrona y Rosalía," Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo*, and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco. El ingenio o las delicias del campo* make clear. As Lorna Williams points out, "since Cubans were supposed to be identical to Spaniards" during this colonial moment, "a narrative founded on a notion of Cubanness that acknowledged the cultural contributions of the non-Hispanic element violated the rules of decorum to which writers in Cuba were expected to give allegiance" (4). In these

texts, then, antislavery becomes a function of anticolonialism and the feudally oppressed slave serves as a figuration of the Cuban nation “enslaved” by Spain’s obscurantist colonialism.

Given this context, it is curious that slavery does not play a key role in the 1839 novella.<sup>14</sup> As is the case of the short story, at first glance, race seems relatively unimportant to the novella. Racial conflict is downplayed in the text as early as the frontispiece, which portrays a phenotypically white—possibly blonde—girl wearing a white dress kneeling before an elderly Afro-descended woman, whose darker color only serves to draw attention to the young girl’s light complexion. While both 1839 texts, like their 1882 successor, refer to Cecilia by the racialized appellation “la virgencita de bronce” (1839a 203; 1839b 49; 1882 101), the general lack of attention paid to slavery and free black life in the earlier versions of *Cecilia Valdés*—characteristics for which the 1882 text is famous—make it easy for the reader to dismiss the physical contrast between Cecilia and Isabel as a Cuban iteration of the typical romantic dichotomy between dark and fair ladies. Thus, much as, in the short story, political protest is easily subsumed and obscured by the text’s gothic elements, in the novella, too, the racial context is overshadowed by the work’s nineteenth-century literary conventions.

The color-coded dichotomy between Isabel and Cecilia does not, however, hold as the 1839 novella develops. While the 1882 text’s climax comes when Cecilia, in a jealous rage over Leonardo’s marriage to Isabel, asks her mulato suitor José Pimiento to exact murderous revenge, much of the 1839 edition revolves around Isabel’s conflict with her cousin Antonia over Leonardo’s affections. Far from the discriminating and sophisticated foil for Cecilia that readers have come to know from the 1882 novel, in the earlier version, Isabel (frequently described as being from the very un-urbane “monte”)—and not Cecilia—, is moved to impropriety by her jealousies. Meanwhile, instead of the archetypal mulata femme fatale—“a dangerous combination of beauty and malice” (Kutzinski 22)—immortalized by the 1882 text, in the 1839 novella, Cecilia is presented as a young girl who must be taken care of by her grandmother.<sup>15</sup> On another occasion, Cecilia is accused by her friend Nemesia of knowing nothing about men. While the novella does refer to “el estado calenturiento de su amoroso corazón” (53), grammatically, “calenturiento” is merely a “state” of a noble heart that is more properly modified as “amoroso.”<sup>16</sup>

Unfinished, the 1839 text ends somewhat abruptly when Leonardo, possibly persuaded as to Cecilia’s superior personal qualities, attempts to convince his friend Diego Meneses to court the possessive Isabel so that he may be free to pursue Cecilia. To his friend’s objections, Leonardo counters: “las mujeres son y serán de quien las trata. Fundados en ese principio y en la inconcusa debilidad de la mujer, los sabios legisladores romanos, por derecho antiguo, ordenaron que permaneciese perpetuamente bajo la tutela” (244-45)—not unlike slaves. Equally subjected by Roman law to the power of the *paterfamilias*, creole Isabel and Afro-descended Cecilia are placed on the same plane in a far-fetched variation on what Williams identifies as the del Monte group’s politically convenient rhetorical equation between creoles subjected to the Spanish crown and African bondsman enslaved by creoles.



Meneses, however, is unconvinced by the lack of attention to racial hierarchies paid by Leonardo's discourse (as, perhaps, are most contemporary readers) and suggests that his friend give Cecilia up, a proposal that Leonardo vehemently rejects:

¡Abandonar a Cecilia! [. . .] ¿Cecilia que es mi cielo y mi delicia, y mi gloria? Cecilia mas brillante que el sol, y mas hermosa que todas las mujeres del mundo? Mira, no me lo vuelvas á proponer porque peleamos de seguro. Por mi mulata santa, sería yo capaz de abandonar y despreciar todos los tesoros imaginables. Si alguna vez he creído que estaba enamorado es ahora de Cecilia. (245)

Leonardo's words (though callow) seem sincere. If that is the case, by having Leonardo go to the length of jilting his white betrothed for a mistress of color, Villaverde—however uncomfortably or improbably—suggests the possibility of an integrated future for Cuba, gesturing at an interracial foundational romance between Leonardo and Cecilia. In this way, he seems to distance himself from the more pessimistic views regarding national consolidation that he expresses in the short story, in which interracial union is presented as always already corrupted by the colonial situation.

Yet, the notion of racial reconciliation through romance in an 1839 text will appear to anyone familiar with the history of nineteenth-century Cuba—the second-to-last country on earth to abolish African chattel slavery—to be as problematic as the delmontinos' mobilization of black slavery as a metaphor for the creoles' colonial status. Meneses, too, finds Leonardo's declaration that he will leave wealth and standing behind for his "mulata santa" improbable, and goes to bed. Undeterred, Leonardo then turns to his friend Pancho Solfa:

Y le estuvo hablando gran pieza de la noche con calor; aunque sin fruto [. . .] porque como hombre de letras menudas [. . .] no era tan facil se diese por convencido, dado que Gamboa le alegára su vanidad, y le pintára castillos de filigrana, que se desmoronaban ante la dialéctica positiva y ruda de un cursante de leyes. En esta batalla, el sueño se apoderó de entrambos mancebos por sorpresa, cual un esbirro de policía, que le echa el guante á los distraídos bebedores, teniéndolos en cama, medio desnudos, y atravesándoles las últimas palabras en la garganta: motivo para que quedasen con la boca abierta. (245)

The first (and only drafted) volume of the 1839 edition ends here, "con la boca abierta." There is no second volume in the true sense—the canonical 1882 *Cecilia Valdés*, as I mentioned above, is radically different and by all rights its own, separate novel from the earlier versions. The foundational romance of racial reconciliation that Leonardo proposes is—quite literally—unable to reach completion: the participants have fallen asleep mid-sentence, their very utterances left unfinished, to say nothing of their half-baked schemes; despite Villaverde's evident plans to write more (the term "Tomo I" appears on the book's cover page, promising another installment that the author never delivered), the uncompleted text, like Leonardo, is left with its mouth hanging open. That Villaverde was unable to finish what he started and marry Leonardo to Cecilia points to

the unviability of the interracial alliance unsuccessfully imagined for the Cuba of the 1830s and 40s by the author, himself not a full believer in racial justice.<sup>17</sup> This skepticism regarding the possibility of racial democracy in mid-nineteenth century Cuba was not unfounded; just five years after Tomo I was published, following the discovery and foiling of the Escalera slave conspiracy, the incipient community imagined by Villaverde's novel would be decimated by the recrudescence of caste boundaries and the repression of Cuba's free community of color—a series of events that led to the exile of none other than del Monte, the leader of the antislavery nationalist literary movement.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, if the short story ends mysteriously with the disappearance of its female protagonist, removed from the public sphere before she has had the chance to enter it fully, the novella pathetically dead-ends with the male protagonist in a drunken stupor, as unable to close his mouth as the author is to close the narrative. Both versions, then, resist Sommer's foundational paradigm: the short story presents Cecilia as a "fallen woman" but stops short of suggesting that she has had a child that might embody the future nation; the novel does not place Leonardo into an appropriately reproductive marriage with either the creole Isabel or the mulata Cecilia, but instead leaves him half-naked in bed with two other men. If, as Álvarez García argues, Villaverde's earlier texts show the inner workings of the colonial state, it seems that that state—dominated, as the delmonteans were well aware, by plantation economics and the fear of slave revolt—is unable to unite its creole and Afro-descended populations in order to produce a nation.

## 1882

As Raimundo Lazo explains, even though four decades separate the first two versions of *Cecilia Valdés* from the canonical novel, the story was never far from Villaverde's mind during his US exile (237). Given the constant mental revision that that situation must imply, I want to suggest that the inconclusiveness that characterizes the 1839 texts might provide the key to understanding one of the more problematic aspects of the definitive 1882 version: the incest plot and the child that it produces, who disappears from the story as soon as she is born. Like the 1839 novella—which presents the possibility of an interracial union that it fails to bring to fruition—the 1882 novel, by uniting Leonardo and Cecilia only to reveal the unsavory nature of that pairing, appears to found the nation while simultaneously pointing to the impossibility of such a foundation. Therein lies the difference between the two extended narrative texts: while, in 1839, the optimistic Villaverde was able to suggest interracial consolidation of the Cuban nation but not see it through, by 1882 he considered that possibility to be as socially and morally degenerate as the incest through which it was allegorized.

A common trope in literary romanticism, the sexual union of siblings appears in several of Villaverde's earlier works, particularly "El ave muerta," which tells the same tale of accidental incest as *Cecilia Valdés* but replaces the interracial aspect with a class difference between Vicenta and Leandro (an obvious literary cousin of *Cecilia Valdés*'s Leonardo), the tale's star-crossed white lovers. Similarly, though not completely absent from the earlier versions of *Cecilia Valdés*, the (mere) possibility of incest is relegated to the background of the 1839 texts. While the episode in which Cecilia encounters a very uncomfortable Cándido Gamboa and his family, including Adela, the legitimate daughter who bears a



striking resemblance to Cecilia—made famous in the definitive 1882 novel (75-77)—, is included in both 1839 versions (1839a 188-192; 1839b 24-26), as in “Petrona y Rosalía,” it is the romantic conflict between love and lust and the corollary fear of loss of feminine virtue that drives the plots of the 1839 texts. It is not until 1882 that Villaverde, like many other Latin American writers of his generation, explicitly linked interracial romance and incest together in the same ideological constellation.<sup>19</sup>

The incest that pushes Leonardo and Cecilia’s interracial union from the realm of the improbable (as in the 1839 novella) to that of the unpalatable (as in the canonical 1882 novel) can be considered a reflection on the forty years of history that transpire between drafts. The 1882 novel—prepared after Villaverde had seen his many of his *contertulios* from the del Monte group forced to leave Cuba in the aftermath of the Escalera Conspiracy and himself had been exiled in 1848 as a result of his collaboration with the failed filibusterer Narciso López, to say nothing of the failure of the ‘Ten Years’ War to secure Cuba’s liberty—represents a critical reflection on the frustrated nation-building period of the 1830s and 40s in which the text’s first versions appeared.<sup>20</sup>

Villaverde weaves the forty-three year gap between drafts into the very fabric of his text. The formative time lapse between the two “tomos” is acknowledged in the author’s prologue to the 1882 edition, which mentions his imprisonment for participation in Narciso López’s filibustering expedition nine years after the publication of the earlier drafts of *Cecilia Valdés*.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, the prologue goes on to narrate Villaverde’s shift away from romanticism and towards realism (Rodrigo Lazo 179). In the romantic 1839 texts, Leonardo’s choice between dark and fair ladies can represent a romantic subversion of social hierarchies and, by uniting seemingly disparate elements in the national body, serve to exalt the Cuban *volkgeist*. In the 1882 realist novel, on the other hand, the underlying unity between creoles and Afro-descendants is simultaneously the basis for and the bane of national consolidation.

### **Incest as Revolution**

In his 1882 novel, Villaverde allegorically projects the fraught question of national unity onto the complicated dynamics of the Gamboa family, in which Peninsular, creole, and Afro-Cuban members vie for power. Significantly, Latin American *independentista* rhetoric typically condemned Spain for paternalistically treating Americans as children, casting the king of Spain as “more an overprotective father than a remote tyrant” (Felstiner 159)—a trope that, in the 1882 *Cecilia Valdés*, is reflected in the tensions between Peninsular father Cándido Gamboa and his creole son Leonardo. Doña Rosa, the young man’s mother, comments to her husband that her son reacts to Gamboa’s purchasing of a title by stating that “la nobleza comprada con la sangre de los negros que tú y los demás españoles robaban en África para condenarlos a eterna esclavitud, no era nobleza, sino infamia, y que miraba el título como el mayor baldón.” The Spanish-born father responds by angrily exclaiming, “¡Vaya si le hierva la sangre criolla en las venas! Todavía sería capaz el muy trompeta de principiar por su padre la degollina como se armara en esta Isla el desbarajuste de la Tierra Firme” (422), thereby elevating the inter-generational family conflict into an allegory of the political struggle over Cuba’s colonial status and transforming, as Vera Kutzinski notes, Leonardo’s decision to disobey his

father through his affair with his mulata half-sister Cecilia into a revolt against the colonial patriarchy (32), in this way depicting “a society that vindicates its right to exist as such without outside guardianship” (Croguennec-Massol 6).<sup>22</sup>

Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s 1913 *Totem and Taboo*, which postulates the origins of civilization in the blood guilt of a mythical band of troglodytic brothers who killed their father, the clan’s alpha male, in order to break his sexual monopoly on the tribe’s women (their mother and sisters), Gabriel Croguennec-Massol notes that, “in many foundational narratives, the story begins with a transgression.” In this case, it is the creole son’s transgression against his Peninsular father, Cándido Gamboa, whose opposition to the relationship between Leonardo and Cecilia is misattributed as an expression of his own sexual interest in the girl. Croguennec-Massol argues that, as the foundational act of transgression that brings the Cuban nation-state into being, “incest in *Cecilia Valdés* gives this work a foundational dimension, representative of a society still in construction” (6). As Doris Sommer, punning on the Spanish term for “star-crossed love,” postulates, the novel is “about impossible love, not because blacks and whites should not love each other—after all, they are mutually attractive and produce beautiful children—but because slavery” (and, with slavery, the Spanish colonial patriarchy that upholds the institution) “makes it impossible” (128). In this way, as Werner Sollors optimistically theorizes, “sibling incest” and the union of black and white colonials “can thus be interpreted as the victory of revolutionary *fraternité* over the tyrannical father” of the metropole (319).

In this Freudian reading, in which the incest prohibition represents an exercise of paternal authority by limiting the son’s sexual access to the women of the clan, Leonardo and José Dionisio, his Afro-Cuban rival for Cecilia’s affections, are, despite (or perhaps because of) the racial difference between them, engaged in a fratricidal struggle to assume the colonial father’s authority over Cecilia who, in her *mulatez*, comes to allegorize a Cuban nation that, in theory, may be possessed by either the Spanish patriarch’s black or white sons.<sup>23</sup> Once the anarchic blood crimes—Leonardo’s symbolic overthrow of Cándido through his defiance and José Dionisio’s murder of Leonardo—are consummated, civilization, in the form of the rule of law (embodied by the interlocking prohibitions against incest and patricide), may arise in the form of the Cuban nation-state. It therefore follows that, in killing the creole Leonardo, the Afro-descendant José Dionisio gains control of the Cuban nation that Cecilia represents. According to this Freudian reading of the novel, Villaverde presents non-whites as the catalysts for and rightful heirs to Cuban independence. Incest thus “results in white patriarchy’s belated acknowledgement” (Sheffer 36) of mixed-race people as fellow members of the Cuban national family, a concession that Gamboa inevitably must make in order to explain Leonardo’s death.

Yet, once again, this anticolonial Freudian reading is predicated on Leonardo’s belief that he is competing sexually with his father don Cándido for Cecilia. However, the fact that Leonardo is mistaken as to his father’s true intentions means that the novel’s ending cannot represent a Freudian wish-fulfillment fantasy of a sovereign racial democracy emerging from the ashes of the Spanish colony. Rather than ending with revolutionary brotherhood’s triumph over the colonial patriarchy, in the novel, Afrodescendants José Dionisio and Cecilia are imprisoned—that is, removed from society—for creole

Leonardo's murder and, dead, Leonardo is hardly in any position to inherit his Peninsular father's position in colonial society. With his multiracial foundational protagonists either deceased or confined, Villaverde, in a departure from the typical task of the Latin American historical novelist, runs the national family's "line of generation" into the wall of incest, signaling not theorist Noé Jitrik's "camino formal" towards a racially consolidated future nation but, rather, as in the 1839 texts, a dead end (16).

### **Foundational Fictions Unfounded**

Thus, while, unlike the 1839 novella, Villaverde is able to finish the 1882 version of *Cecilia Valdés*, he still leaves the narrative "con la boca abierta" without concluding the narratological work of national consolidation that the novel seems to promise by bringing together members of opposing factions in erotic union. As critic Juan Gelpí notes, "a diferencia de otras novelas decimonónicas que tan bien ha estudiado Doris Sommer, en la novela de Villaverde no hay una historia de amor que represente de manera alegórica la unificación nacional" (56). At the same time, however, in urging star-crossed lovers towards cross-factional unions, Villaverde's narrative recreates the deep structure of the foundational romance, even as, through the incest plot, it refuses the genre's traditional ending. This imitation of the foundational fiction only serves to turn the genre's conventions against themselves, narrating not the consolidation of a class or the foundation of a nation, but the frustration of those occurrences.

The 1882 novel's open-mouthed ending is all the more problematic in light of the dramatic political gains that Afro-Cubans had made in the preceding years. In 1878, for example, racial restrictions on suffrage were abolished while, in 1881 (a year before the definitive *Cecilia Valdés* was published), interracial marriage was reinstated (Helg 27)—a legal change that would have rendered Cecilia and Leonardo's offspring a legitimate member of the national body.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps most importantly, in 1880, as Villaverde was readying his manuscript for press, the Spanish Cortes passed the Ley de Patronato, a plan for the gradual phasing out of slavery, thereby eliminating the fear of slave revolt that had long thwarted Cuban independence movements. Thus, at the same moment when, Ada Ferrer argues, Afro-Cubans were rapidly gaining agency in the nationalist army, Villaverde raises the possibility of protagonism in the national narrative, but, through the incest trope, presents the option as unsavory.<sup>25</sup> If, in 1839, when Afro-Cuban marginality was a foregone conclusion, Villaverde could entertain the possibility of a foundational union between creole Leonardo and mulata Cecilia as a literary conceit, by 1882, two facts would have been clear to the author: 1) that Afro-descendants would soon be full members of the Cuban national family, at least in legal terms, and 2) that, given that the plantation economy was the basis of the nationalist bourgeoisie's wealth, full racial equality could only undermine the economic bases of the nation. On the one hand, the creole elite and the Afro-Cuban masses are, in a sense, "married," as the success of the plantation economy depends upon an indissoluble union to which both are equally integral. On the other, the colonial economic nature of the relationship means that the equality that the indissoluble union between masters and slaves implies would, paradoxically, dissolve that union.

Already disenchanted by the ongoing failure of the independence struggle, interracial incest must have struck the exiled author as an obvious metaphor for this seeming impasse, a sign of what was beginning to look like the ultimate unproductivity of the Cuban nationalist cause. As numerous scholars have noted, as it is deployed in the 1882 *Cecilia Valdés* and similar texts, incest functions as a lurid narrative structure to contain the social leveling inherent in miscegenation. A child of the same colonial father, Cecilia is as much a member of the national family as is Leonardo, an acknowledgement of the fundamental place that Afro-descendants occupy in Cuban society. Yet it is precisely because of the family identity that they already share that the two cannot legitimately unite to form their own (national) family; consanguineous relations are thus mobilized to cancel the equality that conjugal relations would otherwise confirm. Much in the same way that Leonardo's death and Cecilia and José Dionisio's subsequent confinements simultaneously imagine and negate the possibility of social leveling, the trope of interracial incest presents whites and nonwhites as equally members of the national family, but in an uncomfortable way that hardly makes further integration appear a healthy option.

Villaverde embodies this dis-ease surrounding national consolidation in the figure of Cecilia and Leonardo's daughter. Though she is metaphorically situated to become the representation of a future Cuban nation founded by the union of creoles and Afro-descendants, that union is doubly invalidated by both miscegenation and incest. The effect is that the child is rendered illegitimate—in all senses of the term. Of embarrassing origins, Leonardo and Cecilia's mixed-race child cannot serve as the ideal citizen for an imagined future community struggling for legitimacy on the international stage. Indeed, the child's existence is so problematic that, in what might otherwise seem an uncharacteristic act of narrative carelessness on Villaverde's part, she drops out of the story the sentence after she is born, leaving the issue of national consolidation that she embodies unresolved.

Thus, the 1882 *Cecilia Valdés*'s foundational structure aside, in keeping with the term's etymology, in the novel, *mula-taje*, like incest, fails to produce fertile offspring—that is, a Cuban national project that will not invalidate itself by uniting elements that are already too close and eliminating the racial difference upon which the island's sugar economy depends.<sup>26</sup> Rather, as the narratologically unjustifiable disappearance of her child suggests, Cecilia's "womb is a tomb" (Kutzinski 31) where the creole national project is laid to rest. Tying miscegenation, incest, and illegitimacy together into an image of an unviable national future, *Cecilia Valdés* is not a novel of national foundation, but of nationalist frustration.

### **American Gothic: Interracial Incest as a Counterdiscourse to Foundational Romance**

A sign of late nineteenth-century society's "neurotic" inability to advance beyond colonial race divisions (Luis 117-18) and indicative of "a nation in a state of arrested development, unable as yet to reconcile the mixed-up, mixed-race world as it is with the binary order—white/black, us/them, civilized/barbaric—that the West had touted since the Enlightenment" (Sheffer 14), the interracial incest trope was becoming increasingly

common in Latin American “foundational” literature as the nineteenth century—bloodily marked by racialized battles between reformers and traditionalists—wore bleakly on. While, as I noted above, incest is a common motif in Euro-American romanticism, the trope takes on special resonance in the racially heterogeneous environment of the Americas, as texts such as “Petrona y Rosalía,” the Puerto Rican Alejandro Tapia y Rivera’s 1867 drama *La cuarentona*, the Argentine Juana Manuela Gorriti’s 1861 short story “Si haces mal, no esperes bien,” the Ecuadorian Juan León Mera’s 1877 novel *Cumandá*, and the Peruvian Clorinda Matto de Turner’s 1889 novel *Aves sin nido*—all of which discuss romantic relations between white and mixed-race half-siblings—attest.<sup>27</sup> This explosion of interracial incest texts—which mirror the foundational romances’ interest in cross-factional alliances while ultimately revealing those alliances as unviable (again, the mulato as a *mula* unable to reproduce legitimately and found the nation)—during the latter half of the nineteenth century suggests a development in the foundational fictions model as the genre struggles to take the New World’s racial realities into account.

In order to understand the stakes of Villaverde’s mobilization of interracial incest to block national foundation in a way much more definitive than Cecilia’s disappearance or Leonardo’s falling asleep at the respective ends of the two 1839 texts, it is necessary to follow Rodrigo Lazo’s lead and read the 1882 *Cecilia Valdés* not exclusively as a Cuban national novel, but also as a hemispheric text—particularly, as a work that was well aware of the foundational romance genre circulating throughout the Americas at the time of its writing. Even though he had lived four decades outside of Latin America when he published the definitive version of *Cecilia Valdés*, it is likely that Villaverde would have been familiar with foundational texts such as Argentine José Mármol’s 1852 *Amalia* and Chilean Alberto Blest Gana’s 1862 *Martín Rivas*.<sup>28</sup> Much as, as Anne Fountain argues, it was in the cosmopolitan New York of the late nineteenth century that José Martí learned about the other countries of *Nuestra América* (77-95), it seems inevitable that Villaverde would have read Latin American literature while living in the northern metropolis. After all, as Nicolás Kanellos, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, and Deborah Castillo, among others, have shown, the nineteenth-century northeastern United States was a major center of Spanish-language publishing—the first edition of the anonymous *Jicoténcal*, the first Spanish American example of the historical genre to which the 1882 *Cecilia Valdés* belongs, for example, had been published in Philadelphia in 1826. Despite the author’s claim in the prologue to the definitive 1882 edition that, for years, the only novelists that he read were Walter Scott and Alessandro Manzoni, as critic Esteban Rodríguez Herrera notes, the 1882 version of *Cecilia Valdés*—unlike its 1839 precursors—is littered with Spanish words not commonly used in Cuba, pointing to the Cuban *émigré*’s wide reading in the developing Spanish American literary canon during his exile (164-65). Even if he had not encountered Latin American foundational texts, Villaverde would have been familiar with their North American counterparts; James Fenimore Cooper’s works were already known in Cuba before Villaverde went into exile (Torriente 128), while, working as a writer, translator, and publisher in nineteenth-century New-York literary scene, he likely would have read *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), in which Nathaniel Hawthorne, a celebrated member of the American Renaissance, first theorizes the “romance” genre.



Yet, in its interracial incest plot, *Cecilia Valdés* departs from the foundational texts of both Anglo and Latin America. If the white characters of foundational fictions such as the Argentine *Amalia* and the Chilean *Martín Rivas* can form politically convenient *alianzas* (in the sense of both “alliances” and “wedding rings”), it is more difficult to apply the foundational fictions model to works such as *Cecilia Valdés* that deal with the interracial consolidation of the nation. Rather, instead of founding the nation, texts such as the Cuban *Cecilia Valdés*, the Ecuadorian *Cumandá*, and the Peruvian *Aves sin nido*—produced, importantly, in countries where, unlike Argentina and Chile, racialized non-wage labor was still the bedrock of the economy—delimit the nation’s human borders, policing the racial boundaries of citizenship by granting protagonism in republican life to some while denying it to others. Written as the nation-state project was failing in much of Latin America—witness the defeat of *independentista* forces in the Ten Years’ War in Cuba, the debilitating struggle between liberals and conservatives in Ecuador, or the War of the Pacific in Peru—, interracial incest texts by Villaverde, León Mera, Matto de Turner, and others might be thought of as counterdiscourses to the foundational romances proffered by the previous generation of nationalist writers such as Mármol and Blest Gana, who did not pay much attention to race when laying out their national projects—or Cooper, whose racially exclusive nationalism would have proven unacceptable in a late nineteenth-century Cuba where, as I have explained, Afro-descendants were making considerable political strides. In transforming the foundational fictions’ romance plot into an unsavory tale of *amor imposible* and refusing the genre’s traditional resolution of national foundation through cross-factional *alianzas*, Villaverde and other late-nineteenth century writers use the trope of interracial consanguinity as way of declaring the earlier nation-building models to be—like incest and mula-taje—unviable.

However, to read *Cecilia Valdés*’s conclusion as a racially exclusive wish-fulfillment fantasy is too facile. Despite Cecilia’s interment, Leonardo’s white betrothed Isabel—redeemed as the voice of reason by the 1882 narrative after her 1839 depiction as a jealous country bumpkin—does not become the mother of the Cuban nation, as does the white Alice following the mixed-race Cora’s expulsion from the imagined community in Cooper’s 1826 *Last of the Mohicans*; rather, secluded in a convent, she is in some ways as removed from society as Cecilia in her asylum and, more tellingly, rendered permanently unable to produce legitimate children for the national family. By the same token, Cecilia and Leonardo’s daughter does not die (as does that of Rosalía and Francisco in Tanco y Bosmeniel’s “Petrona y Rosalía,” for example); Villaverde simply fails to share her fate with his readers. The child’s disappearance from the narrative, along with plantation aristocrat Isabel’s ultimate infertility, then, may be read as signs not necessarily of racial exclusion, but of the author’s uncertainty regarding Cuba’s inevitably interracial future in the years leading up to abolition and independence.

Yet, this reading, too, seems deceptively simple. Villaverde resisted the foundational plot in all three versions of *Cecilia Valdés*: first by making Cecilia’s relationship with her creole suitor the catalyst for her destruction; then by showing Leonardo as unable to formalize his relationship with either the mixed-race Cecilia or the creole Isabel; and finally by removing Cecilia, Leonardo, their child, and the romantic rivals Isabel and José Dionisio from Cuban society. In these texts, national consolidation appears as desirable, but the preexisting colonial economic relations render further proximity unpalatable, making it



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tricky to imagine the community through a narrative that does not raise more questions than it answers (such as, what happens to Cecilia's daughter, who disappears from the 1882 novel rather like Cecilia herself does from the 1839 short story?)—that is to say, it becomes difficult to craft a narrative that does not fall asleep with its mouth open. Yet, if Villaverde's foundational romances refuse to come to their logical conclusions (national consolidation through legitimate foundational marriage), it is important to remember that so too did the process of nation-building in Cuba and other racialized colonial and neocolonial New-World societies for much of the nineteenth century.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> According to William Luis, the character of Cecilia Valdés was inspired by a woman courted by one of Villaverde's schoolmates (104). Enrique Sosa Rodríguez, meanwhile, suggests that the character of Leocadio/Leonardo Gamboa was based on the figure of Cándido Rubio y Lima, a real-life student at the Universidad de La Habana (400-401). As far as literary antecedents are concerned, it is interesting to note Tanco y Bosmeniel's poem "La niña cubana," included in an 1836 letter to del Monte, which details the violence rendered against an African-born slave named Cecilia by her white mistress (Tanco y Bosmeniel "Letter"). The poem differs dramatically from Villaverde's texts in obvious ways. However, given that Tanco and Villaverde knew one another through del Monte, it is worth considering how this little-known text using an Afro-descended Cecilia to demonstrate the abuses of creole power in colonial Cuba may have influenced Villaverde's *Cecilia* series.
- <sup>2</sup> For more on adaptations of *Cecilia Valdés*, see Bravo Rozas and Mejías Alonso.
- <sup>3</sup> For more on the constitutive relationship between lettered culture and nationalism, see Ernest Gellner. For a study of the influence of the lettered elite in Latin American public life, see Ángel Rama.
- <sup>4</sup> The del Monte group offered to purchase Manzano's freedom in exchange for his autobiography. An English translation was published by Richard Madden in London in 1840, but the work did not appear in Spanish until 1937.
- <sup>5</sup> Suárez y Romero finished his *Francisco. El Ingenio o las delicias del campo* by 1840, though, due to the author's fear of the colonial censors, the work was not published until 1880—and then, in the United States.
- <sup>6</sup> On the impact of the Haitian Revolution in Cuba, see Trouillot and Fischer 2004. On the Aponte Conspiracy, see Franco and Palmié.
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed study of Madden's role in the publication of Manzano's *Autobiography*, see Luis.
- <sup>8</sup> For more on La Escalera, see Paquette.
- <sup>9</sup> A problematization of Villaverde's supposed abolitionist sentiments is established in the next pages.
- <sup>10</sup> I will return to the significance of the time lapse between the 1839 and 1882 versions later.
- <sup>11</sup> I have followed the lead of Salvador Bueno, editor of the anthology *Cuentos cubanos del siglo XIX*, in which I found the story, in modernizing the spelling.
- <sup>12</sup> For more on the Gothic in nineteenth-century Cuban literature, see Alonso 66-83.
- <sup>13</sup> Written between "Petrona y Rosalía" and *Francisco*, while the 1839 *Cecilia* texts, unlike Tanco and Suárez's works, did not remain unpublished for decades, they were not included in the packet of del montean texts sent to Richard Madden, perhaps, as Lorna Williams suggests, due to their lack of explicit antislavery content (20). Del

Monte did send a copy of the 1839 novella for perusal to Jaime Badía in Paris (Badya to del Monte. Feb. 13, 1840. Andioc Vol. 4 21).

- <sup>14</sup> Imeldo Álvarez García and Iván Shulman have suggested that, as with the short story, in the novella, too, Villaverde may have crafted a deliberately tame text in order to avoid repercussions from the colonial censors (Álvarez García, *Acerca* 319; Shulman xvi). Colonial censorship seems to have been, at the very least, a source of concern for Villaverde. Writing during the aftermath of the discovery of the La Escalera slave conspiracy, in a September 9, 1844 letter to del Monte, the novelist would state: “Tan negro veo el porvenir de este desventurado pais, i tan insoportable se hace cada día la durísima censura a que estamos sujetos, los que escribimos que seria preciso, o cambiar de ideas i corazones, o reducirse a no decir mas que frivolidades de teatros, modas, bailes & i á nada de esto me siento inclinado” (“Letter” 99). Yet, despite the author’s “lack of inclination,” the 1839 novella, significantly tamer than the canonical delmontian texts mentioned above, dedicates considerably more space to describing balls than to depicting bondage. (I have chosen to respect editor Sophie Andioc’s decision to conserve the original nineteenth-century spelling in this quote from del Monte’s *Centón epistolario*.)
- <sup>15</sup> On the *topos* of the hypersexualized mulata and Villaverde’s role in the propagation of that myth, see Kutzinski.
- <sup>16</sup> I have conserved the original nineteenth-century spellings used in the first (and only) edition of the 1839 novella.
- <sup>17</sup> Nine years after penning the devastating vision of interracial relations found in the short story, Villaverde would join Narciso López’s failed plot to annex Cuba to the U.S. as a slave state.
- <sup>18</sup> On the repression of free people of color in post-Escalera Cuba, see Helg.
- <sup>19</sup> On New-World incest narratives, see the next pages.
- <sup>20</sup> For more on the role Narciso López and filibustering in the development of nineteenth-century Cuban exile literature, particularly Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés*, see Rodrigo Lazo.
- <sup>21</sup> Not content to discuss this history in his prologue, Villaverde is careful to build the checkered history of Cuban nationalism into the structure of the 1882 text. Importantly, the first version of the story begins in 1826 or 1827, not 1812, as does the 1882 edition. As many critics have noted, 1812 was the year of the Aponte slave rebellion, a fact that locates the narrative firmly within the history of anticolonialism and race conflict on the island. At least as importantly, though, 1812 was also the year of the promulgation of the Constitución de Cádiz, which abolished Cuba’s subordinate status to the Peninsula by declaring equality of rights between *españoles* and *americanos*. This additional significance of the date cannot be accidental, as the novel’s second chapter begins “uno o dos años después de la caída del segundo breve período constitucional” (48) when, in the 1820s, the Cádiz Constitution was reinstated and quickly abrogated. Similarly, the narrator comments on the 1826 Mexican-Colombian plan to invade Cuba, which, “sin la officiosa intervención de los Estados Unidos” would have freed the island of Spanish rule, “de acuerdo con los planes de Bolívar y los deseos de los cubanos” (165). In this reference to the frustration of the early republican project in Cuba, 1826 is presented as a past that did not come to pass. For more on *Cecilia Valdés* as a self-conscious historical novel, see Enrique Sosa Rodríguez, who also provides a comparison of the 1882 and 1839 texts.

<sup>22</sup> My translation.

<sup>23</sup> As both Helg and Ferrer demonstrate, rather than a forgone conclusion, the question of whether the white minority would conserve political supremacy in an independent Cuba was a crucial one in the years leading up to independence. I will discuss this point further below. Meanwhile, as far as the conflict between Leonardo and José Dionisio is concerned, it is worth considering Vera Kutzinski's comments on the mulata body as a space for the working out of patriarchal rivalries between men of differing racial backgrounds: "As race and, for that matter, class differences between men are textually blurred by implying, quite wrongly, that all men have access to the same masculine system of signification, the nonwhite female body becomes the exclusive signifier of race and sexuality. It also becomes a site—in fact *the* site—of Cubans' struggle over cultural meaning and political authority" (42). For a discussion of *mulatez* in Spanish American letters, see Martínez-Echazábal.

<sup>24</sup> On the history of interracial marriage in colonial Cuba, see Martínez Alier.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the interracial incest trope in New-World letters, see Kristal, Sollors, Rosenthal, and Fischer 2005.

<sup>26</sup> For another reading of the metaphorical relationship between mulattos and mules in New-World literature, see Eduardo González.

<sup>27</sup> The plot of Gorriti's 1861 short story is uncannily similar to that of Villaverde's 1882 novel. Set in colonial Peru, the work centers around a light-skinned mestiza named Cecilia who unwittingly begins a relationship with her creole half-brother. As is the case of Villaverde's Cecilia and Amalia, Gorriti's Cecilia bears a striking resemblance to her creole half-sister Amelia.

<sup>28</sup> While I have been unable to identify nineteenth-century North American publications of *Martín Rivas* and *Amalia*, it is clear that the latter work, at least, enjoyed an international circulation: it was published in Spain in 1851; in France in 1851, 1874, and 1892; and in Germany in 1877. Mármol's writings, in fact, had formed part of a donation of Southern Cone literary texts made to North American libraries by Argentine ambassador Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in mid 1860s (Sarmiento 202).

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