



A Postmodern “Play” on a Nineteenth Century Cuban Classic: Reinaldo Arenas’s *La Loma del Ángel* H. J. Manzari

Reinaldo Arenas’s *La Loma del Ángel*, published in the United States in 1987, represents one of a number of novels written by Cuban writers in exile, and yet, it is of particular importance with regard to the comparative study of the postmodern Caribbean narrative and the nineteenth-century Cuban *costumbrista* novel. *La Loma* appeared seven years after the young author left Cuba along with some 120,000 exiles that took part in the Mariel boat lift. Having lived the majority of his life under the Castro regime and finding himself imprisoned for his creative zeal, homosexuality, and ambition, the author’s life parallels many aspects of other Cuban exile writers but in particular, Cirilo Villaverde. The two authors were born in the countryside of Cuba and both writers were profoundly engaged in political and cultural changes in their respective periods of historical crisis. They suffered the trauma of prison and fled Cuba, by way of the sea, to Florida and eventually to New York. In New York, Villaverde rewrote and completed the definitive edition of *Cecilia Valdés*, while a century later Arenas comprised his own version of Villaverde’s masterpiece.

Cirilo Villaverde’s nineteenth-century Cuban novel *Cecilia Valdés*, or *La Loma del Ángel*, is representative of the impact of *costumbrista* Spanish writers, and in the prologue to his 1882 edition he confesses the influence of Walter Scott and Alessandro Manzoni on his fiction. But for the critic of Caribbean literature, Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés* is much more. This work has been classified as a historical novel, *costumbrista* novel, antislavery novel, romantic novel, and realist novel; and most importantly, it has been seen as the canonical foundational novel of Cuban identity as suggested by numerous critics, including Antonio Benítez Rojo. It is a novel that celebrates Cubanness (*cubanía*) and speaks to the tensions of a nation in crisis.

As a writer struggling to share his own perspective on a national crisis, it is no surprise that Reinaldo Arenas chose to rewrite this foundational work of Cubanness. However, the irony lies in the fact that while Cirilo Villaverde fought against the stagnation of a society of classes, Reinaldo Arenas fled from a dictatorial government that wanted to put

an end to class-based society in post-Batista Cuba. While the two works of fiction are products of distinct historical periods, to a certain extent they can be seen as coinciding in the development of Cuban letters. Villaverde's book can be considered a response to colonialist oppression and a fairly precise register of the tension of his time. In this regard, Arenas's *La Loma del Ángel* can be seen as a postmodern response to Villaverde, not only because Arenas appears concerned with re-forging a critical community with readers as modernist writing had sought to do, but also the necessity to transcend the modernist notion of the autonomy of the work of art and corresponding role of the artist as officiating priest and guardian of public speech. Moreover, *La Loma del Ángel* foreshadows the cultivation of textual self-reflexivity as a means of sharpening and problematizing the perception of history as it blurs the conventional division between the critical and the creative through fiction.

Arenas's choice to rewrite this particular nineteenth-century Cuban classic is a logical continuation of his earlier works which share the same postmodern skepticism and revisionist strategies. The novelization of history had been a fundamental concern of Arenas since the publication of his first three novels: *Celestino antes del alba* (1967), *El mundo alucinante* (1969), and *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* (1980). Already in his earlier fiction, Arenas had begun the exploration of suggesting connections between Cuba's past and its present political situation. The interaction between history and fiction can be seen as a constant throughout, and a clear indication of his own personal feelings towards the issue. In *El mundo alucinante*, Arenas rewrites, in palimpsestic form, the life of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, a Mexican Dominican. He bases his revisionist fictional tale on Teresa de Mier's *Memorias* (1817) and *Apología* (1819). In the prologue of one of his English versions of *El mundo alucinante*, *The Ill-Fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando*, Arenas is quoted as writing:

Siempre he desconfiado de la "historia", de la "minucia", del "dato preciso", del "hecho". Porque en definitiva, ¿qué es la Historia? ¿Un mero archivo de carpetas ordenadas cronológicamente? ¿Registra la Historia el instante crucial en que Servando se encara con una planta de pita, o cuando Heredia se siente de súbito afligido al no ver una sola palma contra el cielo en el horizonte desolado? Impulsos, motivos, las secretas percepciones que conmueven a un hombre no aparecen en los libros de historia, no pueden aparecer, lo mismo que en el quirófano nadie habla del dolor de un hombre desgarrado por el escalpelo. (Mullen 72)

For Arenas, history is a series of randomly ordered facts or archives. His relativistic view of historiography and the writing of history question the universal and totalizing nature of the subject as it pertains to the nineteenth century. It becomes apparent from his comments that he rejects a pragmatic view of historiography and talks about those moments that history is incapable of capturing, particularly those pertaining to silenced and liminal groups. His is essentially a perspective that views traditional historiography as outmoded and replaces it with a view of multiple histories. His ideas coincide with other writers of the postmodern era, typically characterized by a "questioning of the universal and totalizing in the name of the local and particular" as well as a recognition that "any certainties we do have are [. . .] positional, that is, derived from complex networks of local and contingent conditions" (Hutcheon 12).

At times, Arenas integrates history and the fantastic as well as debunks and demystifies the orthodox or romantic version of the past. His revisionist treatment of nineteenth-century Cuban life contradicts official versions and supplements them. Throughout the novel, he employs textual self-reflexivity to suggest that historical record is happenstance and uncontrollable and he subverts rather than seeks order. Conceivably, this could serve as an attack on the Cuban government and its control, or the hegemonic nature of the Castro “presidency.” In an interview with Francisco Soto, Reinaldo Arenas declares:

A mí me interesan fundamentalmente dos cosas en el mundo de la narrativa. Uno, es la exploración de mi vida personal, de las experiencias personales, de mis sufrimientos, de mis propias tragedias. Y dos, el mundo histórico. Llevar esa historia a un plano completamente de ficción. Interpretar la historia como quizás la vio la gente que la padeció. En ese plano de re-escribir la historia a través de la ficción o de la parodia podrían situarse *El central* o *El mundo alucinante* o *La loma del ángel*. (47)

The initial reaction of some scholars to *La Loma del Ángel* has been one of disappointment and shock. They consider this reworking of the original *Cecilia Valdés* to be heresy, due to its frivolous style of imitation and its blatant intertextuality as part of the author’s own process of parody. Vincenzo de Tomasso finds Arenas’s application of parody in *La Loma* to be a risky part of the novel’s fabric. De Tomasso believes Arenas’s use of parody to be excessive and Arenas to be warped in his belief that he is creating something new and original. De Tomasso views Arenas’s characters as lacking in all respects and they are purely “delle caricature” of the original version (551). In addition, he declares the grotesque parody of Villaverde’s novel to be “del tutto gratuito [e che] non porta nessun risultato” (551). What De Tomasso fails to realize, however, is that this type of parodic recipe is characteristic of Arenas’s other works, as well as other Caribbean writers; his is a kind of Caribbean baroque with a touch of surrealism and a dash of “sabor a fritada.” Moreover, Arenas’s form of parody, one that is rooted in excess, one that de-privileges and revitalizes, is a perfect postmodern form because it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. More importantly, this type of parody, characteristic of the postmodern parody discussed by Linda Hutcheon in her critical studies on the subject, forces the reader to reconsider the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions (11). Finally, de Tomasso fails to realize that it is not a gratuitous application of parody on the part of Arenas but rather a clever and planned postmodern strategy that exploits parody to exhaustion.

The basic interplay in *La Loma del Ángel* takes place between an original model and that which seems to be a critical commentary as well as an imaginary reaction on the part of Arenas. At first glance, *La Loma* appears extraordinarily similar to its original source. Although considerably shorter (140 pages versus some 400-plus), the work is nevertheless also divided into thirty-six chapters and both versions open with important prologues. *La Loma* is divided diachronically into thirty-two chapters and synchronically into four meditations on love narrated by the voices of José Pimienta, Cecilia Valdés, and Arenas, respectively.

The original and voluminous *Cecilia Valdés* is also divided into four parts and a brief conclusion. It narrates the incestuous relationship between the mulatto Cecilia, the illegitimate daughter of Cándido Gamboa, and Gamboa's young, white, and irresponsible son, Leonardo. Interwoven into the fabric of nineteenth-century colonial Cuba, Villaverde's tragic story tells the tale of this love-struck couple. While a great deal shorter in length than the original, Arenas's version of the tale appears to be quite faithful to the original in the way that it recreates the basic themes of Villaverde's work. Yet, even though Arenas's text seems to respect the thematic argument of Villaverde's masterpiece, an intertextual reading of work reveals significant differences (Mullen 174).

In the prologue to his 1882 edition of *Cecilia Valdés*, Villaverde explains the genesis of his work and the literary models that influenced his writing. The characters created by novelists like Villaverde become symbols that go on living in the collective imagination of a people, in their vocabulary and in their national memories. Arenas's "Sobre la obra" is more than just a meditation on the intertextuality of his work, at least on an ideological plane; it serves as the foundation for this postmodern novel. A close kin to the theoretical strategies prescribed by Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, here Arenas's application of historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradoxical relationship of the real past while textualizing its accessibility to us today, the basis for his rewriting of *Cecilia Valdés*.

The importance the prologue has on one's reading of *La Loma del Ángel* cannot be exaggerated since structures such as titles, prefaces, and epigraphs all have a voice and perspective, a point of view that ultimately reveals one of the multiple meanings of the text. An abbreviated look at Arenas's prologue will affirm such a perspective:

La recreación de esa obra que aquí ofrezco dista mucho de ser una condensación o versión del texto primitivo. De aquel texto he tomado ciertas ideas generales, ciertas anécdotas, ciertas metáforas, dando luego rienda suelta a la imaginación. Así pues no presento al lector la novela que escribió Villaverde (lo cual obviamente es innecesario), sino aquella que yo hubiese escrito en su lugar. Traición, naturalmente. Pero precisamente es ésa una de las primeras condiciones de la creación artística. (9–10)

Many are the ways in which Arenas betrays the original work. His prologue calls attention to a degree of self-consciousness that is also typically postmodern. The ironic reflection on the part of the author, who himself is engaged in the process of writing, signals the constructiveness of the text and its reliance on imaginative and creative strategies. In essence, he emphasizes the precariousness of the writing of history and about historical events and evokes the Aristotelian difference between the poetic and the historical as *La Loma del Ángel* assumes the freedom to invent and, in this respect, places history on the same footing. The author is able to achieve this by carefully deconstructing the original text by strategically weaving parodic elements into the novel. It can be said that *La Loma* explores various forms of parody and ends by taking it to a postmodern level of exhaustion. Throughout the novel, parody is characterized by a certain level of allusiveness that constantly permits the transmission of a sense of mockery with respect to its socio-historical referent (Skłodowska 76).

If we understand the prologue of *La Loma del Ángel* to be an indication of authorial intent, we can infer that the target of his parody is historical discourse as a whole. Indeed, Arenas's *La Loma del Ángel* is a questioning of the mimetic capacity of writing which needs to rely on some discursive technique in order to make it more legible. In doing so, Arenas employs a type of Menippean satire and carnivalesque attitude (Skłodowska 49). Let us recall for a moment that Bakhtin traced the character of the novel back to its roots in popular carnival practices. These practices have been transmitted through the genre of the Menippean satire which over time in literary history has been reconstituted as the dialectical response to "official" monological literary genres (McHale 172). The "carnivalized" moments found throughout *La Loma* serve as the parodic double and antithesis of the original or official literature. Moreover, these moments confirm the idea that "postmodern fiction is the heir of Menippean satire and its most recent historical avatar" (McHale 172).

The critical difference between *Cecilia Valdés* and *La Loma del Ángel* can be attributed to the way Arenas achieves a balance between the historical dimension and his use of inversions (Mullen 76). The *mundus inversus* that is characteristic of carnival is clearly a crucial part of understanding this work while at the same time reinforcing its nature as a new historical novel. According to Seymour Menton, the new historical novel in Latin America is the combination of the comic, the documented, and the invented historical novel, discrete categories that aid in his classification and are helpful in describing and analyzing the phenomenon of the proliferation of the new historical novel throughout the Caribbean (44–45). Moreover, in this critical look at *La Loma*, we will confirm Seymour Menton's categorization of this work as pertaining to the realm of new historical novels in Latin America.

Since *Cecilia Valdés* is considered to be a typical nineteenth-century novel, in the sense of its linear uni-dimensionality, it provides Arenas with the perfect text for re-creation. Arenas achieves a paradoxical expansion through condensation, and his text would surprise modern readers for being, perhaps, richer than its original. In a broader sense, the novel itself speaks to the question of the subjectivity of writing. True to its word, *La Loma del Ángel* is not simply a copy of the nineteenth-century work but a recasting and remodeling of one form into something completely new. However, Arenas's fiction serves to parody not only Villaverde's canonical work but all *costumbrista* novels from that period.

In agreement with a number of the tenets established by Seymour Menton, Arenas's new historical novel confirms the impossibility of ascertaining the true nature of reality or history while establishing a paradoxical relationship between the original and the new version. The nucleus of the original argument remains untouched by Arenas. That is to say, the incestuous relationship between Cecilia and her half-brother Leonardo finally results in the death of Leonardo at the hands of José Pimienta. Moreover, Arenas does alter the basic dynamic of the work in the initial chapters as well as in the conclusion, thus transforming the nature of some of Villaverde's principal characters. These transformations or "inversions" are key elements in the narrative strategy employed by the author.

Such strategies are also employed when Arenas rewrites the female characters in his novel. In the traditional version of *La Loma*, only men are associated with passion. The women are depicted as helpless and passive, something quite typical of the Romantic period. Regardless, in his novel, Arenas rewrites the traditional dichotomy of the white European male dominating or taking advantage of the black African mother. Throughout Arenas's version, Doña Rosa takes on the guise of the authoritative and powerful female. She is controlling and manipulative, and shares the same passionate drive often associated with men in Villaverde's novel.

As mentioned earlier, the "original" Doña Rosa Sandoval y de Gamboa is the stereotypical nineteenth-century bourgeois Cuban wife; she is strong-minded and spoils her son Leonardo. She does not respect her slaves and punishes them cruelly. Doña Rosa is outwardly jealous of her husband's extramarital relationships and this is reflected throughout the novel. In Arenas's version, Doña Rosa has an even stronger mind of her own, a twentieth-century mind, and her actions will change the meaning behind the story's tragic ending. While in the original version she may be described as "passive aggressive," in Arenas's work these traits are exaggerated even further. Hyperbole plays an important role in Arenas's version as Doña Rosa is more than just a "mujer celosa" and "desconfiada," and she clearly understands that she cannot take her husband at his word (21). She is aggressive and modern, taking matters into her own hands (as is the case with many of Arenas's female characters).

In chapter five of the Arenas novel, appropriately titled "Doña Rosa," she exhibits characteristics that would be atypical of Villaverde's version. Doña Rosa questions her husband's fidelity and the many supposed trips he was to have made to visit wealthy landowners in the surrounding countryside. She vows revenge and thus, Doña Rosa employs the services of her slave and master chef, Dionisios, to spy on her husband. After careful consideration, Dionisios reports to her that Don Cándido has a beautiful young mulatto mistress with whom he has just had a child. The child is Cecilia, the protagonist of the novel, and is said to look just like Adela, Doña Rosa's daughter. The scene that follows is a comical one and is an exemplary episode of Arenas's use of parody. In response to her husband's blatant act of infidelity, Doña Rosa orders Dionisios, the cook, to impregnate her. As she barks out orders to him, she yells: "¡Cierre la puerta de la habitación y desnúdese inmediatamente!" (21). The scene that follows is just as comical, for as the slave approaches the vast proportions of his mistress, Doña Rosa reminds him: "¡Recuerde que le he ordenado un negro!," to which the slave protests: "Señora, no sé si mis luces alcanzarán para tanto" (22). After having completed the terrifying task of mounting the large, whale-like Doña Rosa, Dionisios is dismissed from his mistress's bedroom and as he leaves, promises never to tell a soul about their adventure. Doña Rosa, on the other hand, is quite content with her efforts and as the slave makes his way to the kitchen she proclaims: "Que ya mi honor ha sido bien reparado" (22). Ironically, Doña Rosa revenges her own honor, something highly unlikely in Villaverde's day, notwithstanding the fact that she does so by committing adultery herself and with one of her own slaves.

Doña Rosa is left pregnant by Dionisios and in the following chapter, entitled "La Loma

del Ángel,” we are told that nine months later she begins to feel labor pains. Understanding that she cannot give birth to a black child in her own house, she flees to the Iglesia del Ángel to ask for help. Ironically, Doña Rosa is so fat that no one notices the pregnant state in which she finds herself. The Iglesia del Ángel is famous for helping “respectable” women in situations that would bring shame to the family and Doña Rosa’s would not be the first bastard child to be born there. She confesses her sins to the bishop of the church, Don Morell de Ohcaña y Echerre, and is taken by a nun to a cell where she awaits her time. That same night, Doña Rosa gives birth to a beautiful mulatto child whom the bishop baptizes as José Dolores and to avoid any suspicions, gives the child over to Merced Pimienta, who too had been visited by an “ángel” and had just given birth to a mulatto, Nemesia Pimienta. Hence, with the birth of José Pimienta to Doña Rosa, Arenas adds another twist to the theme of incest that pervades both the original and new work. This time, however, Cecilia is pursued by two gentlemen, Leonardo and José Pimienta, who coincidentally are half-brothers. In addition, the ironic twist in the story rests on the fact that the tragic ending of the novel takes on new meaning as Leonardo is killed by his half-brother, José Pimienta. This new element added by Arenas could have various interpretations, especially if the novel suggests another possible Cuba rewritten by Arenas, or it could simply serve as a postmodern game piece used by the author to toy with his readers.

As mentioned repeatedly in this study, there are several ways in which *La Loma del Ángel* parodies the original text of *Cecilia Valdés* while shedding light on other possible nineteenth-century truths. Besides numerous comical acts of betrayal, like changing the names of certain characters and places, there are a fair amount of critical changes that include some shameless and vulgar episodes excluded by Villaverde, like the previous chapter on Doña Rosa. These alterations are vital components of Arenas’s postmodern fabric, changes that force the reader to question the historical and mimetic nature of Villaverde’s original work.

Brian McHale tells us in his various studies of literature that postmodern fiction mingles the realistic and fantastic modes of fiction. While authors such as Arenas turn away from reality to experiment with the myriad of worlds created by language, they also choose to explore the fantastic and the creative powers of narrativity. At the heart of Arenas’s transformation lies a shift in the manner of understanding and perceiving reality, which also coincides with the basic precepts of postmodernism. McHale suggests that there is a shift in the dominant from an epistemological understanding of experience to an ontological one. While neither is mutually exclusive, McHale recognizes that for the moment, one—in this case the ontological—is more immediate while the other is backgrounded (11). Throughout *La Loma del Ángel*, we recognize the playfulness of this postmodern text by its narrative tricks, irony, inventiveness, and metafictionality. The fantastic scenes re-created by the author constitute the foundations of creativity within which resides the core of artistic impulse. More importantly, the fantastic scenes in the novel derive their power from the believable analogues of the reader’s reality. There are multiple examples of this throughout the novel. Towards the end of the original narrative, Cecilia gives birth to a beautiful young girl but in Arenas’s version the evolution of the fetus exceeds the boundaries of reality. In the chapter titled “El milagro,” Arenas writes:

Y en menos de cinco minutos, desarrollando una insólita energía, creció desmesuradamente, se abultó dentro de la placenta, tomó la forma ya de un niño de nueve meses, pataleó en el vientre de su madre, cambiándose, para mortificarla aún más el sexo, pues era, un varón; y de un cabezazo, soltando altísimos gritos, salió la niña del cuerpo de Cecilia [. . .].

—¡Mamá! —dijo la niña de inmediato, llegando en dos segundos a la edad de cinco años (116–17)

Notwithstanding all other impulses, we as readers delight in the ease with which we can read similar passages. The above passage exemplifies the many episodes taken from the original text and carefully transformed from the realistic modes of the historical novel into ones relating to the dimension of the fantastic, or as Ottmar Ette suggests: “dimensión que atenta provocativamente contra las exigencias de la verosimilitud cronológica o histórica” (95).

The strategies of excess and parody constitute the principal postmodern element in this novel. The use of hyperbole to demystify the realistic modes of the original work is an essential part of the author’s narrative strategy. In an earlier episode, titled “La cena pascual,” Arenas tests the boundaries of artistic creativity as he describes the Christmas meal shared by the Gamboa family and their guests on the plantation. This particular episode recalls the Pantagruelian banquets suggestive of Bakhtin, of the world as a carnivalesque “fiesta.” The dinner is described as an orgy of food as such ludicrous dishes such as sweet and sour manatee and iguanas in green sauce delight the guests. As the diners bark out their orders to the hordes of servants waiting on them, they literally grow before our eyes and at the end of the night, we the readers discover:

Ya a media noche, cuando terminó la cena, todos se habían convertido en gigantescas y relucientes bolas o cuerpos completamente esféricos que los sirvientes cubrieron con enormes mantas y empujándolos suavemente los condujeron hasta sus respectivas habitaciones. [. . .] No obstante, a pesar de la eficacia de estos esclavos domésticos, algunas de aquellas gigantescas esferas humanas perdieron el rumbo y abandonando la residencia cruzaron (y destruyeron) el jardín [. . .] en aquellos inmensos cuerpos rodantes iban el cura, doña Rosa y sus hijas (111–12)

Eating and drinking are probably two of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body, as evidenced by the previous episode. The banquet image is representative of some of the more popular comic entertainments.

Inversion, amplification, and hyperbole are certainly some of the most important resources that Arenas uses to transform this Cuban canonical work. In contrast to the corresponding pages in Villaverde’s novel, “El Paseo del Prado,” the sixteenth chapter of *La Loma*, does not serve the same *costumbrista* purpose. What appears to be a detailed description of the Paseo del Prado of Havana in *Cecilia Valdés* is transformed by Arenas into a hyperbolic narration about a particular figure in Cuban literature—María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo, Condesa de Merlín—and her tropical evening stroll

along this popular avenue in Havana. This episode speaks to Arenas's critique of the realistic modes of the original work and continues to borrow from the narrative modes linked to the grotesque and carnivalesque. An essential ingredient in the carnivalesque formula is laughter, since it serves as an escape from tension and to distance certain aspects of the text from others (not to mention there is no room for "laughter" in Villaverde's version). Arenas's re-creation of this moment in the novel radically alters the original and leaves us "rolling in the aisles," so to speak. As the Condesa de Merlín enters the narrow cobblestone street of Havana, the narrator tells us:

Tal vez debido a las gigantescas proporciones de la falda que portaba la Condesa ninguna otra persona venía en el carruaje. Llevaba la distinguida dama, además de la falda gigantesca, que a veces al ser agitada por el viento cubría tanto al calesero como al caballo, relucientes botines de fieltro tachonados en oro, chaqueta de fino talle pero con mangas inmensamente acampanadas, largas cintas violetas, azules y rojas que desprendidas del cuello partían hacia todos los sitios; el brillo y color de diversos collares resaltaban aún más la blancura de aquellos pechos aún turgentes y casi descubiertos por la gigantesca manta que la hábil Condesa dejaba caer graciosamente. La cabeza estaba cubierta por un inmenso sombrero de altísima cúpula y alas aún más fascinante y extraordinaria era su inmensa cabellera negra que saliendo del gran sombrero se derramaba en cascadas sobre su espalda cubriendo toda la parte trasera del carruaje. En el centro de esta cabellera descomunal centelleaba una peineta calada incrustada de diamantes. (64–65)

Arenas's fascination with big and grotesquely round female characters permeates many of the ludic scenes found throughout the novel. But the Condesa's appearance is essential to the author's deconstructive strategy. There are various reasons for including and exaggerating her character in his fiction. Arenas, carefully weaves her into the text of his novel, while this episode also serves as an intertextual allusion to scenes in Villaverde's other novel, *La peineta calada*. The episode is immediately followed by the description of an elegantly dressed monkey that accompanies the Condesa and completes Arenas's parody of the original text:

Sobre su regazo y haciendo mil reverencias iba una mona joven del sur de Madagascar, vestida a la francesa y con campanilla de plata al cuello de donde partía una larga cadena de oro que la Condesa sostenía entre sus finos guantes a la vez que batía graciosamente el monumental abanico hecho con plumas de pavo real. Así avanzaban, la Condesa sin dejar de sonreír pero sin mirar a persona alguna, la mona engalanada haciendo mil saludos. (65)

The comedy does not stop here and while everyone is preoccupied and gawking at the spectacle of the Condesa, the ex-slave Dolores Santa Cruz emerges from the spellbound crowd to snatch a precious comb from the countess's head. Not only is Dolores Santa Cruz able to snatch the comb from the lady's head, but she also manages to take the Condesa's hair, leaving her completely bald. The Condesa de Merlín loses her composure

and begins to yell at Dolores, swearing at her in everyday street language and eventually chases after her for three miles. As Dolores finds herself approaching the sea, she throws off her clothes and hurls herself into the bay with the comb held tightly between her teeth. The Condesa follows but leaves her clothes on. The episode takes on a quality of a cat-and-mouse-like chase until the two hurl themselves into the sea. However, the Condesa soon finds herself in a dilemma as strong winds inflate the petticoat of her dress, and as she hits the water it acquires “la configuración y eficacia de un enorme y poderoso velero que impulsado por el viento abandonaba ya la bahía y atravesaba el Golfo de México internándose, a vela tensa, en el océano Atlántico” (67). While all of this is happening, Dolores Santa Cruz manages to escape with the diamond-studded comb and a week later the Condesa de Merlín is reported docking, humiliated, and bald on the shores of France, her adoptive homeland, and swearing never to return to Cuba.

As comical as it may be, this episode stands out not only for its extreme humor, but also because it takes place in the “central” part of the work (the sixteenth chapter of a 34 chapter book), and even more so because it is dedicated specifically to the Condesa de Merlín. The Countess does not actually appear as a character in *Cecilia Valdés*, however. Reinaldo Arenas exaggerates and amplifies a brief allusion to the Condesa de Merlín made by Villaverde. More importantly, her presence in *La Loma del Ángel* constitutes an obvious anachronism. That is, between 1812 and 1832, the years in which the “history” of *Cecilia Valdés* are said to take place, the Condesa resides in Europe and her brief visit to Cuba does not take place until 1840 (Olivares 174–75). The Condesa de Merlín seems to be a historical character that fascinates Arenas. Arenas titles one of his novels *Viaje a La Habana*, which is undoubtedly indebted to a work written by the Condesa, a shortened version of *La Havane*. Also, in his posthumous novel *El color del verano*, Arenas dedicates a whole chapter to her character. Without a doubt, she is also a literary figure that has taken on importance in the last two decades among Caribbean writers and in particular, Arenas, as a famous female and cosmopolitan traveler whose vision of Cuba has interested many.

The “carnivalization” and cannibalization of the original work continues throughout the novel as Arenas deconstructs the Cuban society Cirilo Villaverde so methodically described. Ludic episodes replace the traditionally *costumbrista* chapters dedicated to the dance of the “Sociedad Filarmónica,” the “Capitán General,” and the “Tinaja.” But one episode in particular, entitled “La máquina de vapor,” warrants further discussion. At the sugar mill *La Tinaja*, the slaves, workers, family members, and friends of the Gamboa family reunite for the premiere of their new English-made “máquina de vapor,” the first to be introduced in Cuba. Much to everyone’s chagrin, the machine fails to work properly and the mill foreman orders the slaves to climb onto the machine in order to resolve the problem. One of the mill slaves, believing to have discovered the problem, releases the security valve on the exhaust and finds himself and his friends sucked into the machine and consequently propelled “más allá del horizonte” (95). Here, the fantastic and the real are combined again to draw laughter from scenes that originally bore allusion to the mistreatment of slaves. Screaming at the top of his lungs that the English purposely built this machine to free his slaves, Don Cándido incites the other mill slaves to riot. He yells: “¡Paren ese aparato o se me van todos los esclavos! ¡Yo sabía que con los

ingleses no se puede hacer ningún negocio! ¡Eso no es ninguna máquina de vapor, es una treta de ellos para devolver los negros a África!” (95).

Only after hundreds of slaves climb into the exhaust pipe shouting “¡A la Guinea!” are they able to stop the machine from “disparando esclavos hacia todos los puntos cardinales” (97). This “ingenious” episode (a play off the word *ingenio*) not only carefully portrays the tensions between the Spaniards and the English, but it also anticipates chapter 31, “El baile de la Sociedad Filarmónica,” where Arenas departs from the traditional *costumbrista* description of the dance and adds a political subtext involving Fernando VII and the English. Moreover, the scenes from the *Tinaja* constitute another postmodern strategy on the part of the author. They reflect a conscious effort on the part of Arenas to give voice to the marginalized and silenced groups from Cuban history, the many slaves of Cuba’s sugar plantations. In Villaverde’s version, the slave population was always viewed as a destabilizing factor in Cuba’s white society. Here, Arenas exhibits a concern for the “other” and gives a voice to this sector of the Cuban population.

Another characteristic of postmodern authors is the use of metafiction, and Arenas demonstrates this by inserting Cirilo Villaverde into his own narrative. The insertion of real world figures in a fictional work is a case of what Umberto Eco has termed a “transworld identity” (McHale 36). In his research regarding this confrontation between worlds, Brian McHale recognizes that this particular trait shows the sign of one world penetrating another and he views this as a violation of an ontological boundary. The presence of real-world characters in a fictional text violates the boundaries between the real and the fictional. When this happens, we witness an ontological scandal when a character from the real-realm encounters and interacts with purely fictional characters (McHale 85). Such is the case in chapter 27, entitled “Cirilo Villaverde.” In this episode, the Gamboa clan searches out the author of their destinies, Cirilo Villaverde. At this point in the novel he is believed to be hiding from the government somewhere in Pinar del Río. The members must ask their creator to clear up some confusion regarding an episode about Doña Rosa in the previous chapter. Apparently, Doña Rosa is jealous of the fact that Isabel and Leonardo are to be married and declares that her son will not choose a wife while she is alive. An argument ensues because Don Cándido invites Isabel to make herself at home. His actual words are: “He aquí tu casa; espero que goces y te diviertas en ella como en la tuya encantadora de Alquizar” (106). Doña Rosa’s dilemma is with the phrase “encantadora de Alquizar” and wants to know if it refers to the house or to Isabel’s own person. Don Cándido declares that only the author and creator of the novel in which they are characters can clear up such an issue and so the family searches for Villaverde in the surrounding mountains. When they find Villaverde in a mountain village teaching *campesino* children to read, the nineteenth-century author proclaims that he cannot help them with their query and that such questions are left up to the readers to interpret, to which Doña Rosa retorts: “¡Pues si no sabe escribir que se haga zapatero o que se vaya a cargar cañas a un trapiche! ¡Pero las cosas hay que aclararlas ahora mismo!” (107). Villaverde is unable to calm his aggressors and the family becomes furious with the author’s inability to satisfy them with his answers. The scene ends with them chasing him away, walloping him with boards and rocks. After Villaverde has fled, Doña Rosa asks the others if the imbecile will die at the end of the story, to which Don Cándido sarcastically responds: “Eso queda para el curioso lector . . . ” (108). The fact that Villaverde himself is unable to satisfy his own characters places his supposed authorship in question. In Brian McHale’s study *Postmodernist Fiction*, the critic describes the co-opting

of the author into the story itself as an essential characteristic of these types of novels. While the earlier modernist works “sought to remove the traces of their presence from the surface of their writing [. . .] or they effaced their own subjectivities behind the surrogate subjectivity of a first-person narrator or interior monologist,” postmodern fiction returns the author to the forefront (199). McHale believes that including the author as a character in his own work involves a “paradoxical interpenetration of two realms that are mutually inaccessible, or ought to be” (204). By extension, Cirilo Villaverde’s metafictional presence in this chapter also questions one’s ability to depict historical events in a true and credible fashion and reinforces the tendency of new historicists to question traditional historiography. While traditional historicists believe history, along with literature, to be predictable, it is this type of deconstruction that reinforces the narrative’s “new historical” fabric. This characteristic also reflects the Chinese-box structure, as suggested by McHale, in which the characters in the novel become aware of their fictionality. McHale explains that in postmodernist fiction such as Arenas’s, “characters often serve as agents or carriers of metalepsis, disturbers of the ontological hierarchy of levels through their awareness of the recursive structures in which they find themselves” (121).

Arenas’s rewriting of *Cecilia Valdés* cannot be seen as a unique and isolated phenomenon because it represents one of the most basic characteristics of all Latin American literature: the constant search for one’s own authentic roots that has resulted in a conquest through a constant rewriting and questioning of history. We must not forget that the juxtaposition of the serious and the ludic throughout the text is used to reinforce the fact that this is a novel about history (in the sense that it reveals the horrors of the institution of slavery) as well as about writing. While Villaverde’s nineteenth-century novel represents the treatment of slaves in a moral/philosophical light, Arenas injects the same images with parody and jest. The most startling episodes regarding the brutality toward slaves described in the original are replaced with ludic scenes that parody the romantic codes so commonly attributed to *Cecilia Valdés*. These are scenes in which an expected seriousness is transformed by an open and obvious abuse of a way of writing. In this manner, the episode of the slaves being catapulted back to Africa by the “máquina de vapor” can be read as both a commentary on the real horrors of slavery, as Arenas seems to sympathize with their cause, or a parody of Villaverde’s realistic and sometimes pious depiction in the original. The many references Arenas makes to the tensions between the recently arrived slaves and the mulattoes brings up issues of *mestizaje* and the inner struggles of the various slave groups and generations. Finally, Arenas’s conclusion takes Villaverde’s one step further in that José Pimienta and Dionisios remain free, even after having committed heinous crimes.

In the last chapter of *La Loma del Ángel*, Arenas recognizes the power of resistance on the part of the slaves and the final historical consequences as well as emphasizing his own resistance to the “historical” interpretations made by Villaverde in *Cecilia Valdés*. This resistance is representative of contemporary Caribbean writers as they search to understand the crisis of truth among the Spanish American novels routinely categorized as postmodern historiographic metafiction, and Arenas’s novel is no different. *La Loma del Ángel*, like all postmodern texts, is characterized by its incredulity towards the meta-narrative, or in this case that which is Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés*. Arenas’s novel represents a deliberate rejection of the grand and supposedly universal paradigms that have

governed Cuban letters for centuries. In this regard, *La Loma del Ángel* celebrates the fragmentation of Cuban culture and the role of reference itself in Cuban letters, while at the same time problemizing how we read and understand the contemporary Caribbean novel.

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