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Literary Cross-Over in the Domingo del Monte Tertulia: Anselmo Suárez y Romero's and Cirilo Villaverde's C. Valdés Protagonists

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Literary Crossover in the Domingo del Monte *Tertulia*: Anselmo Suárez y Romero's and Cirilo Villaverde's C. Valdés Protagonists

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Abstract: This article charts the similarities between the first short story appearance in 1839 of what later became Cirilo Villaverde's well-known nineteenth-century novel, *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's "Carlota Valdés" (1838). The study considers the circle of influence in Cuba for writers during this time period, focusing on the space of Domingo del Monte's famed *tertulia* (the literary gathering in which the *esclavo-poeta* Juan Francisco Manzano was encouraged to finish his autobiography). One of the questions the present study seeks to answer is: How can one assess the realm of influence surrounding literary gatherings such as del Monte's *tertulia*? How do both Villaverde's and Suárez y Romero's short stories relate to Cuba's nascent nationalism in the nineteenth century?

Keywords: Anselmo Suárez y Romero, Cirilo Villaverde, *mulata*, Domingo del Monte, *tertulia*, nationalism/nacionalismo, nineteenth-century Cuba/Cuba en siglo XIX

For those familiar with Cuban antislavery narrative, the story is a familiar one. In the outskirts of Havana, a young, racially ambiguous girl is orphaned at birth and raised by a caring elderly woman. The motherless *mulata* grows up and is engaged when her betrothed dies unexpectedly, a death followed shortly by her own. The aforementioned summary, for many, is seemingly recognizable, but it is not that of Cirilo Villaverde's foundational novel *Cecilia Valdés*, published in 1882. Instead, the summary represents the work of another Cuban writer of the early 1800s, Anselmo Suárez y Romero, and the title is not *Cecilia Valdés*, but "Carlota Valdés," published in 1838. The work posthumously traces the life of the orphan girl, revealing her deepest sentiments through fragments of letters the fictional Carlota writes to her friend Lola. In the following pages, I argue that the delicate, melancholy tone of Suárez y Romero's short story "Carlota Valdés" heavily influenced a later work written by another member of Domingo del Monte's *tertulia*: Villaverde's "Cecilia Valdés" (first published in 1839 in short-story form as a precursor to the 1882 novel). Taking a closer look at the possible ties between the two Cuban writers within the del Monte literary gatherings, the current study traces three primary resemblances between the two works: Carlota and Cecilia are both involved in failed romances, raised by elderly females, and are motherless.

Domingo del Monte's *Tertulia*

In Domingo del Monte's famed literary *soirees* "cada cual leía la obra que había escrito, leíase a presencia de unos cuantos *amigos*, introducíanse en ella las correcciones convenidas, llevábanse a la prensa y tornaba después a examinarlas muchas veces" (Bueno 243, emphasis mine). The so-called friends that Suárez y Romero describes above include Cirilo Villaverde. To test the realm of influence among attendees of del Monte's *tertulias*, I consider the two aforementioned authors: Cirilo Villaverde and Anselmo

Suárez y Romero. Suárez y Romero is best known for composing Cuba's first antislavery novel, *Francisco* (written in 1838 and 1839 and published in 1880). By affirming the likelihood Villaverde and Suárez y Romero pertained to the same social and literary circles in the late 1830s, while also demonstrating the two Cuban authors' similar literary interests, the current study argues that *Cecilia Valdés*, first published as a short story in 1839, drew substantial influence from Suárez y Romero's significantly lesser-known and lesser-studied C. Valdés character. "Carlota Valdés," for its influence on Villaverde's more popular fictional Valdés, demands our critical attention as readers and critics of Cuban antislavery narrative.

It is important to clarify which version of *Cecilia Valdés* I compare with "Carlota Valdés" in the following pages.¹ Villaverde published his prized text on three occasions: first as a two-part short story in the literary magazine *La Siempreviva* in 1839, and shortly after that same year, a first version of the novel was published. It was not until 1882 that the novel was published in its complete, definitive form. Although the most commonly read version is the 1882 publication, written in large part from exile in New York, I am primarily interested here in "Cecilia Valdés," the first appearance of the work in short story form. The 1839 story was published closest in time to "Carlota Valdés." Additionally, this first version was likely the most influenced by del Monte's literary gatherings and although it does not provide a complete picture of the slave society in nineteenth century Cuba, it elicits a vivid account of Havana society, featuring the famed *mulata* protagonist, Cecilia.

To contextualize the publication dates of both Villaverde's and Suárez y Romero's short stories, it is beneficial to consider the time frame in which Cuban antislavery narrative was most prominent. According to William Luis, "Antislavery narrative refers to a group of works written mainly during the 1830s, an incipient and prolific moment in Cuban literature" (1). Luis classifies the first, and also the most productive, historical period of the Cuban antislavery novel as beginning in 1835 and ending with emancipation in 1886 (4), a time frame that includes the publications of both "Carlota Valdés" and "Cecilia Valdés." Jorge Camacho's *Miedo negro, poder blanco en la Cuba colonial* offers an alternate envisioning of the ways in which blacks are represented in antislavery literature, with a primary focus on the concepts of impurity, infection, and abjection. Camacho's study is guided less by specific dates of publication (although all primary works analyzed fall between the 1830s and 1880s), and instead focuses on the patterns of literary representation of blacks in Cuba and the racialization of this population.

The year 1835 signals a significant year for Villaverde, Suárez y Romero, and Cuban literature at large. It is precisely during this time that Domingo del Monte's literary circle moved from its city of origin, Matanzas, to Havana. Del Monte, described as "centro de la vida cultural del país," "animador de revistas y tertulias," and an "enemigo velado del absolutismo colonial" (García Marruz 15), is a key figure to assessing the influence Suárez y Romero's work may have had on Villaverde's. The informal channels of communication constructed and maintained by del Monte were imperative to strengthening the Spanish liberal state that was forming during this historical period. The literary circle in Havana constituted the so-called nerve center of del Monte's Cuban communication network, a prime space for the cultivation of his political and cultural project (Aguilera Manzano 75). Del Monte approached the

gathering cautiously and with extreme care.

Del Monte's *tertulias* remained unofficial. They did not follow a rigorous schedule and did not take place in an academy or official centre, but instead in Domingo del Monte's own home. This was in order to avoid the official pressure that was the result of the arrival of Miguel Tacón as Captain General of the island in 1834, when repression of meetings of more than two people increased because Tacón feared they encouraged conspiracies against the government. (Aguilera Manzano 74)

The incessant exchange of manuscripts and texts that occurred among *tertulia* regulars is confirmed in the *Centón epistolario*, published in a total of seven volumes by La Academia de la Historia de Cuba in 1923. Salvador Bueno, who himself has more than 3,000 letters included in the various volumes of the *Centón epistolario*, attests to the fact "todos los patricios criollos de la época" (244) maintained constant correspondence with del Monte. One letter included in Volume Two of the *Centón epistolario* is of particular importance to the present study. In said letter, dated October 21, 1839, Suárez y Romero thanks del Monte for comparing his literary style to Villaverde's: "pasa V á prodigarme multitud de elogios sobre mi estilo comparándome nada ménos que con Villaverde, que es la mayor Gloria á la que yo pudiera aspirar" (414). This letter confirms Suárez y Romero was familiar with Villaverde's work, a familiarity that is unsurprising given that Suárez y Romero was well read and often served as an editor of manuscripts circulating the del Monte gatherings. He edited, for example, Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* and was heavily influenced by Manzano's realist and palpable depiction of slave life in his own *Francisco*. This "editor's circle," an apparent pillar of del Monte's *tertulias*, was widespread and the connections it created between Cuban authors of the time prove countless. Another important year in regards to the present study is 1838, the year "Carlota Valdés" was read in the *tertulia*. Bueno refers to this particular del Monte reunion stating that Suárez y Romero "había llevado un manuscrito titulado *Carlota Valdés*. Del Monte, en carta dirigida a José Jacinto Milanés, habla de la delicadeza, blandura y amor que transparente esta obra" (255).

Charting Connections: Anselmo Suárez y Romero and Cirilo Villaverde

While there is no trace of published correspondence between Suárez y Romero and Villaverde and no confirmation that Villaverde read or edited *Carlota Valdés*, the numerous points of contact and connection between the two Cuban writers, (including various mentions of one another in letters to other friends), prove an irrefutable relationship between the two men, at the very least in the literary sense. Moreover, the two authors had remarkably similar upbringings. Both Suárez y Romero and Villaverde were creoles, born and raised in Cuba, with a marked experience of having lived in rural areas; both witnessed the horrors of slavery firsthand. Villaverde was the son of a sugar mill doctor. It is in this context, according to Bueno, that young Cirilo

hallará junto a observaciones médicas, muchos datos sobre la vida, [y] usos y costumbres de los esclavos negros. . . . [T]odas las escenas de la

cruel vida de los esclavos le iban quedando en la memoria, y cuando fuera mayor, ya alejado de aquellos lugares, escribiría páginas y páginas donde volcaría en buena medida sus impresiones de aquellos días infantiles.
(227)

Suárez y Romero, too, had ample experience living in rural areas plagued by slavery. The author's mother, Lutgarda Romero, moved her seven children to a farm in Puentes Grandes where the author spent the greater part of 1838 writing *Francisco* while making frequent visits to Havana (Bueno 254-55). It is during this same general time period, the late 1830s, that both Suárez y Romero and Villaverde successfully published in *El Álbum*. Suárez y Romero's "Carlota Valdés" was first published in the third volume of the journal.² Villaverde also found a literary outlet in *El Álbum* when he published, also in 1838, the first part of *Excursión a Vuelta Abajo* (Luis 105).³ These publications prove the authors not only shared the same literary circle, but also published in the same Cuban magazines and papers circulating during this time.

Suárez y Romero and Villaverde did not only publish in the same literary magazines, but they also shared similar literary interests. As Rafael Ocasio and Camacho clarify, both began their careers as Costumbrista writers (59, 16). Furthermore, Villaverde showed an established interest in novelettes, similar to the length and style of "Carlota Valdés." He published *La joven de la flecha de oro* in 1841. This short piece, one of his "relatos fantásticos de carácter idílico, cuadros ficticios de pasiones falsas, con personajes inverosímiles" was later defended from harsh criticism by none other than Suárez y Romero in *Cuba Literaria* (Bueno 230). An earlier defense of Villaverde's work by Suárez y Romero is mentioned in an 1839 letter to Suárez y Romero from José Zacarías González del Valle. He writes:

Al cabo recibí carta tuya con fecha de ese propio mes, porque las anteriores de que me hablas no han llegado a mis manos, ni obran en las listas recientes ni atrasadas del correo, ni tampoco la que dirigiste a Domingo incluyéndole la recomendación a favor de Villaverde. Este amigo salió bien por fin, después de muy grandes aprietos que lo tuvieron desazonado y más que desazonado, medroso. (148)

In Suárez y Romero's case, this letter marks Villaverde as not only a fellow attendee of del Monte's literary circle, but as a friend whom he wished to see succeed in the literary sphere.⁴

It is imperative to further consider the two contemporaries, Suárez y Romero and Villaverde, within the specific context of del Monte's *tertulias*. The attendance of both men at the literary gatherings has been confirmed by a multitude of scholars. Fina García Marruz's study *Estudios delmontinos* contains a detailed chronology of Domingo del Monte. García Marruz confirms that in 1836, shortly after del Monte moved to Havana in late 1835: "A su tertulia concurren novelistas como Cirilo Villaverde, Anselmo Suárez y Romero y José Antonio Echeverría; costumbristas como José Victoriano Betancourt y José María de Cárdenas" (219-20). The list continues nearly an entire page in length, including names of notable philosophers, scientists, poets, and others. Critics Luis, Bueno, and González del Valle also mention both Villaverde and Suárez y Romero in the

context of the del Monte *tertulia*. González del Valle poetically describes the late thirties when illustrative Cuban writers and intellectuals were meeting under del Monte's roof. He equates the period with

una época de esplendor de nuestra historia literaria, reveladora de los sentimientos generosos e ideas avanzadas de aquellos jóvenes escritores que quisieron reformar las costumbres poniendo de relieve por medio del arte literario las lacras sociales de su tiempo. (6)

Some pieces read, or rather, performed, at the *tertulia* in the latter half of the 1830s are better known than others. It is widely cited, for example, that Juan Francisco Manzano shared his antislavery poem "Mis treinta años" with the gathering of Cuban elites and intellectuals in 1836. It is worth mentioning that the works confirmed as products, at least in part, of the del Monte *tertulia* do not constitute an exhaustive list of Cuban antislavery narratives. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, the author of *Sab* (1841), was either not invited or did not attend the literary gatherings.⁵

Publications about C. Valdés

The first sentence of Suárez y Romero's biography, written by Salvador Bueno, describes Suárez y Romero as "una figura preterida, casi olvidada en la historia de Cuba" (253). Not only is Suárez y Romero omitted or written out of the majority of histories of nineteenth century Cuban literature, but many of his noteworthy and important works remain relatively "forgotten" as well. "Carlota Valdés" has been overwhelmingly neglected in critical studies and is difficult to obtain. The story has only been printed twice: in *El Álbum* (1838) and in Suárez y Romero's *Colección de artículos* (1859). Although there is a wide array of criticism centered on *Francisco*, Claudette Williams notes it is "sometimes treated as a nondescript novel of dubious literary stock and suspect antislavery pedigree" (1). The comments that *do* exist about "Carlota Valdés," on the other hand, are overwhelmingly positive and approbatory. González del Valle writes in a letter to Suárez y Romero that he had spoken with Ramón de Palma, (at that time the manager of *El Álbum*), about the work. Palma praises "Carlota Valdés":

Hablando con Palma habrá poco me ha encargado te dé mil parabienes por *Carlota Valdés*, que sale en el próximo cuaderno del *Album*. Dice que nunca le ha parecido tan delicada, tan sentida ni tan hermosa como en la actualidad. (38)

González del Valle, in a letter written in July of 1838, offers his own estimation of "Carlota Valdés." He refers to the "giros y repeticiones de natural abandono" in the story and further notes that the work "...te se echaría en cara pobreza de imaginación y de fantasía" (49).

Suárez y Romero's face of poverty and strife is none other than the protagonist of the work: Carlota Valdés. Reflecting on young Carlota's death at the end of the story, Suárez y Romero marks the budding beauty as a victim of society: "Llamamos sobre su tumba á sus padres . . . mira tu víctima" (148). It is possible to interpret the sadness and

despair present in “Carlota Valdés” as a precursor to the melancholy tone inherent in the plight of the slaves presented in *Francisco*. The conventional representation of slavery in *Francisco* includes

graphic descriptions of the slave’s body after each sequence of whippings; mention of the sensitivity of the protagonist’s bruised body to the rays of the tropical sun and the itchy leaves of the sugar cane; accounts of the demand that a shackled Francisco continue to harvest sugar cane, and so on. (C. Williams 52)

In “Carlota Valdés,” readers perceive a heartrending, dismal tone, but do not necessarily relate this melancholy to the pains of a racially stratified slave society.

Equally melancholy, “Cecilia Valdés” also narrates the life of an orphan girl. Cecilia, a beautiful *mulata* is raised by her grandmother and educated on the streets, free to roam as she pleases. When the young Cecilia’s wanderings, however, lead her to the house of the Gamboa family – a family with whom she bears an uncanny resemblance – the grandmother begs Cecilia not to return. In the 1839 short story “Cecilia Valdés,” Cecilia’s creole lover is Leocadio, not Leonardo (the name of Cecilia’s lover in the 1882 novel), and his relation with the *mulata* ultimately leads to Cecilia’s disappearance and demise (it does not lead, however, to his death as it does in the 1882 definitive version). In the 1882 definitive novel version of *Cecilia Valdés*, opposed to the short story, certain elements have a much stronger, more complex representation.⁶ As Luis remarks, “Blacks and the theme of slavery, so important in the definitive version of *Cecilia Valdés*, are not present in the short story and appear as only a marginal element in the novel” (106)

In addition to publishing in the same literary magazines and attending the same *tertulia*, both Suárez y Romero and Villaverde are sometimes considered “Costumbrista authors.”⁷ Although this classification aptly pertains to both Cuban writers’ careers, Suárez y Romero is more prominently remembered as an important contributor to the Cuban Costumbrista movement. Villaverde is also often cast as “realist,” at times shedding the Costumbrista identification. Rafael Ocasio clarifies, “The Costumbrista Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s articles were unusual at the time of their publication because of their attempts to depict the slaves’ grim chores and the often fatal workplace accidents in sugar mills” (24). Although there is no explicit reference to the plight of the slave in “Carlota Valdés,” Ocasio identifies “Carlota Valdés” as one of the author’s notable Costumbrista articles (25). Suárez y Romero’s 1859 publication *Colección de Artículos*, where “Carlota Valdés” was printed for a second time following its original 1838 appearance in *El Álbum*, contains articles with explicit references to plantation life. Titles of such articles include: “Ingenios,” “Los domingos en los ingenios, and “El corte de caña,” among others.⁸ Perhaps it is no coincidence that “Carlota Valdés,” the sad story of an orphan girl, appears in this collection, too.

Notably, *Colección de artículos* was published by La Antilla Publishing Company and the owner of this publishing house in 1859 was none other than Cirilo Villaverde – a fact that connects the two authors beyond the reaches of the del Monte circle. Luis states: “Villaverde made two brief trips to Cuba, the first from 1858 to 1860 and the second for two weeks in 1888. During the first trip he acquired La Antilla publishing company, which published Suárez y Romero’s *Artículos*” (108). This publishing connection brings

the relation between Villaverde and Suárez y Romero full circle; Villaverde is able to thank his old *tertulia* companion for endorsing his own work in the late eighteen thirties by electing to publish his book over twenty years later.

“Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés”: A Comparison

Both “Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés” are centered on young, beautiful orphans living in Havana. Both motherless protagonists appear constantly surrounded by death: the death of (one or both) parents *and* the death of or deception by a lover. Although not every detail of “Carlota Valdés” is repeated in the 1839 short story “Cecilia Valdés” and there are obvious divergences between the pieces, the bare bones of the narratives hold striking resemblances.⁹ Three of the most prominent commonalities between the two works are the fact that both highlight a tragic love plot of a helpless *mulata*; both orphan girls are raised by elderly females; and both Carlota and Cecilia stress the significance of the non-existent mother figure.

The first of the three ties between “Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés” focuses on the characterization of both budding young women, in “lo florido de su juventud (Suárez y Romero 144) or as “un modelo acabado de belleza” (Villaverde 77). Although there are no explicit references to Carlota’s race in the text, a few key descriptions of Carlota, (to be addressed in the following pages), lead one to believe she was *not* white. Instead, Carlota was likely a *mulata*, much like another girl by the initials of C.V. with whom readers of nineteenth-century Cuban literature are overwhelmingly familiar, Cecilia. Gómez de Avalleneda’s *Sab* is another nineteenth century Cuban novel featuring a protagonist of mixed racial origin; Sab is a *mulato* in love with the white daughter of his master. (Coincidentally, the name of the master’s daughter is Carlota). Published in Spain in 1841, after the first publications of both “Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés,” *Sab*’s classification as antislavery narrative may be debatable, but the objectification of the *mulato* figure is not. Sab is portrayed in the novel as virtuous, but also villainous (Camacho 113) and the terror his mere presence creates for whites such as Carlos Otway – on the wake of successful slave rebellions in neighboring countries like Haiti – permeates the entire work. Vera M. Kutzinski’s study *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* seeks to analyze portrayals of the *mulata/o* in Cuban literature, confirming the figure’s tragic plight: “The destiny of most of the racially mixed characters, male and female, in the novels of reformist abolitionism in Cuba and elsewhere is predictably tragic” (21). Kutzinski further notes that although *Cecilia Valdés* is a modification of the traditional tragic *mulata* formula as Cecilia is alive at the novel’s end, the protagonist does not escape sexual exploitation, abandonment, or despair.

The *mulata* stereotype played an important role in establishing nationalist tropes of race and desire in nineteenth century Cuba, and the characterization of the figure in literature is key to deciphering the shifts in regards to racial exclusivity on the island. The discourses surrounding *cubanidad* or “Cubanness” in the 1830s are, in fact, linked to del Monte’s *tertulia*. Benítez Rojo confirms, “the need to find legitimacy in Cubanness” was a central motif within the del Monte literary circle and, thus, interracial mixing could not be extracted from a desire on the part of the *delmontinos* to influence the beginnings of Cuban nationalism (24). The protagonists of “Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés” represent this multicultural, racially diverse Cuba; both Suárez y Romero’s Carlota and

Villaverde's Cecilia fall within the tragic *mulata* paradigm. Carlota, for example, was born out of wedlock, the result of an undesired birth. The beginning of "Carlota Valdés" describes Carlota's entrance into the world in the following way: "parece que trajo el sello de la desgracia impreso en la frente" (143). This "sello," a permanent marker of the girl's societal status likely refers to skin color, a permanent "stamp" the orphan could not erase. Another possible reference to Carlota's race appears in the first paragraph of the story and relates to the author's use of the term "mancha." The sentence summarizes the work's intent to, in reference to the young protagonist, "rendir homenaje á su mérito sin estimar por *mancha* su origen desgraciado" (143, emphasis mine). Suárez y Romero's word choice – "mancha" – mirrors racial discourse of the time period and likely refers to the non-white skin color of Carlota. Furthermore, toward the end of the story, the young protagonist is described posthumously as an individual "que no cuenta[n] ni con el lustro vano de la cuna" (144). Here, "cuna" references Carlota's ancestry. In nineteenth century Cuba, this "humble lineage" suggests a racial connotation, especially since the second half of the sentence "ni con el brillo de las riquezas" references the economic status into which the girl was born.

Cecilia's race, on the other hand, is confirmed in the 1839 short story by the words of the *comadre* who reveals that Cecilia's mother was "una mulatica engañada por un caballero: y con este motivo que debía de ser mitad noble y mitad plebeya: una cosa que es y no es" (78). The *mulata* classification of Cecilia's mother and "caballero" status of her father, whom the reader later recognizes as Don Cándido Gamboa, marks Cecilia as a *cuarterona*, a quarter black; she is, after all, the "virgencita de bronce" (250). Cecilia, moreover, is a *mulata* that "puede pasar por blanca" (Civantos 105). This categorization aligns Villaverde's protagonist with Kutzinski's classification of "amarillas" or "high yellows," light-skinned *mulatas* prized for their exotic beauty (20). Both Carlota and Cecilia are victims of society, despite their earnest desire to advance their positions. The narrator of "Carlota Valdés" hypothetically posits, "huérfana é infeliz expósita, á qué podía aspirar?" (144), and Cecilia, who knew of her "sangre manchada" desired openly to "rozarse con gentes de otro rango" (249). Although Carlota's plight is not as explicitly associated with race when compared to Cecilia's, "Suárez invokes the strategies of the sentimental novel in order to convey an expression of the female slave's vulnerability" (L.V. Williams 62). While Carlota is not a slave, she *is* a vulnerable female figure, subject to a tragic destiny that claims her from the moment she leaves her mother's womb.

The ultimate fate of both Carlota and Cecilia, aside from the lack of parental figures that will be addressed in the following pages, is related to a failed love plot. Doris Sommer, in her 1981 *Foundational Fictions*, equates failed romantic plots in nineteenth century Latin American novels with representations of national unification. When considering Villaverde's and Suárez y Romero's short stories, it is also possible to interpret both protagonist's failed relationships as unattainable domestic romances within the context of a new nation's creation. Cecilia, in the 1889 definitive version of the novel, is entrenched in an infamous love triangle, or triangles, including Leonardo Gamboa, the well-off *criollo* and son of the slave-trader Dón Cándido Gamboa, the rich, white Isabel Ilincheta, and the *mulato*-musician José Pimienta Dolores. In the 1839 short story, however, Cecilia is simply an orphan *mulata* encountering her first love. The narrator swoons, "el primer amor era las delicias de la vida" (249), later foreseeing that this same

sentiment would also lead to Cecilia's disgrace. The story, then, ends in Cecilia's disappearance, – and possibly death – the young girl equated to one of the dashing Gamboa's "victims" (253). Carlota, too, becomes a victim of "un amor malogrado" (145). Her first love dies of cholera shortly after their initial meeting.

One of the most well-known cholera outbreaks in the Caribbean occurred in Cuba, namely in Havana, in the nineteenth century, primarily during the years 1833-1834. The first reported death from cholera was of a Catalan man living in the Lazaro neighborhood of Havana.¹⁰ This section, the poorest port dwelling outside the city walls (Jenson and Szabo n.p.), is likely a space foster-children like Carlota inhabited. Many other deaths followed, including the mass extinction of barracks of African slaves. According to Deborah Jenson and Victoria Szabo, in 1833:

Cholera spread from Havana to the Matanzas region in mid-March and continued to rage there until mid-June. After an apparent pause in large-scale epidemic activity, Cholera then flared up in Havana and Trinidad (Cuba), in the summer and fall of 1834. (n.p.)

It is highly likely that Suárez y Romero was reflecting upon this very surge of the morbid disease when he wrote "Carlota Valdés" in 1838. The death(s) that plague "Carlota Valdés" and the presence of cholera in the work marks the story with the erasure of human life. Although not as transparent, death is also present in the 1839 short story "Cecilia Valdés." Villaverde compares Cecilia's unmatched beauty to "la flor que brota en un tronco seco, y con sus verdes hojas y su aroma, miente la vida junto de la misma muerte" (245). Following this brief, yet morbid, description, the *abuela*, Chepa, shares a story with Cecilia in a final attempt to instill fear in her young granddaughter from returning to the Gamboa household. The story warns of a young girl, Narcisa, who lives with her grandmother and is tricked by the devil.

La muchachita cantaba y la vieja rezaba; cuando estando así, oyó tocar un violín, allá en vuelta del Ángel. ¿Qué se creyó Narcisa?—que era cosa de baile, y sin pedirle permiso á su abuela, sin decirle palabra, fue poquito á poco, y...tras, echó á correr, y no paró hasta la loma...al llegar Narcisa á las cinco esquinas del Ángel, se le apareció un joven hermoso que le preguntó donde iba á aquella hora de la noche: ella le respondió que á ver un baile.—Yo te llevaré, repuso el joven. . . . Narcisa reparó que según iban caminando el joven se ponía prieto . . . que los pelos de la cabeza se le paraban como alambres...que le nacían dos cuernos en la frente. . . . Narcisa entonces dio un grito, y la figura prieta le clavó las uñas en la garganta como para que no gritara, y cargando con ella, se subió sobre la torre del Ángel . . . pues esto le sucede a las niñas que no hacen caso de los consejos de sus mayores. (246-47)

Chepa's tale foresees Cecilia's own future. Although the story is meant to prohibit Cecilia from wandering the streets without permission – and the narrator affirms "producía el efecto deseado su cuento de cuentos" (247) – Cecilia evolves into Narcisa by the end of the short story when she disappears with Leocadio, never to be seen again.

The tragic tales of the *mulata* orphans, Carlota and Cecilia, are also both marked by strikingly similar upbringings. The hypothetical question that begins “Cecilia Valdés” – “¿contra quién se echará la culpa el pobre huérfano que no conoció á sus padres?” (76) – is nearly identical to the start of “Carlota Valdés.” Suárez y Romero opens his story in the same fashion, describing Carlota as “pobre, huérfana, é hija desventurada del crimen ó de la mala suerte de sus padres” (143). Key to both stories is the orphan status of Carlota and Cecilia, but further connecting the two is what is behind their shared last name: Valdés.¹¹ With regards to Carlota’s background, she was expelled as an infant – without even a kiss from her mother – to a church in Havana. From there, little Carlota was directed to the arms of a “responsable señora, lastimada de su miseria” (143). It is well-known that young children in Havana directed to Casa-Cuna, the national orphanage founded in 1711 (Hollingsworth 29), were given the last name Valdés in honor of the foundation’s founder, Bishop Gerónimo Valdés y Sierra (Faure, Ribes and García). On the other hand, Cecilia, raised by her grandmother, was allowed to wander the Havana streets, her lifestyle described as “vagabunda y callejera” (78). While the Gamboa sisters fawn over her, Cecilia confirms, “Yo vivo con mi abuela, que es una viejecita muy buena, y me quiere mucho” (82-83), but a grandmother’s love does not change the fact Cecilia, too, is a “Valdés” without parents or a permanent home.

The first names Carlota and Cecilia also suggest parallels between the two protagonists, and, moreover, indicate Villaverde drew significant influence from his reading of “Carlota Valdés.” A structural analysis of the names illuminates that each contains the same number of letters, seven, as well as the same number of syllables. Moreover, the epistemology of the names perhaps leads to an alternative understanding of the two orphans. “Carlota,” derived from the Italian “Carlotta,” means manly or strong and “Cecilia,” from the Latin “caecus,” means blind. At first, it appears the significance behind both names signals opposite characteristics. Cecilia is blind in the sense she is unable to perceive the danger inherent in her involvement with Leocadio; and she is also blind to Chepa’s warnings as well as the advice of others who cautioned: “Hija, mira lo que eres, y no cometas locuras” (86). The meaning of Carlota, on the other hand, points to the lack of not only the maternal figure in her life, but also paternal. Although she dwells on the absent mother figure in letters to Lola, she was already fatherless before she lost her betrothed to cholera – the male presence in her life doubly eradicated.

Both Suárez y Romero’s and Villaverde’s young protagonists were raised by older, single, female figures, but this grandmother-like presence in their life does not adequately fill the void of the absent mother. Carlota is seemingly plagued by the maternal void in her life and this absence represents the story’s most salient theme. Much like Carlota and Cecilia’s failed romances can be read as metaphors for Cuba’s nationalist project of the 1830s, (in regards to both *mulata* girls being “unfit” matches for marriage), the erasure of a patriarchal *and* matriarchal foundation in both short stories speaks to the idea of *patria* as a disrupted family. This metaphorical fractured family reflects the inconsistencies within a budding, nascent national culture; both Carlota and Cecilia yearn to restore the family unit – what Sommer refers to as society’s “stabilizing force” (20) – the most natural and organic root in Cuban society. As Benedict Anderson confirms in *Imagined Communities*, in *creole* communities such as nineteenth century Cuba, the first conceptions of “nation-ness” developed (50), and the tensions between racial, cultural, and economic divides in these communities contributed to shifts in early

interpretations of *nacionalidad*.

The fact she has no mother or father is the undisputed source of Carlota's tears, "porque es amarga cosa no conocer á nuestros padres" (144). The young girl is unable to forget the words she has never been able to say: "éste es mi padre, ésta es mi madre!" (145), and it is this longing for parental guidance and love that permeates Carlota's letters to her friend Lola. She asks her dear companion, "¿has visto tú por mucho tiempo una rosa separada de la mata, de su madre?" (146). In Carlota's second letter to Lola, as well as the latter part of the first, the mother/child binary is established. Carlota writes of a mother who gave birth to a child but did not want or was unable to see him or her grow and flourish, later mentioning how the word "mamita" haunts her:

Esta palabra hizo brotar otra vez sangre de mis heridas. ¡Mamita! y la mía dónde está? ¡Ay, querida Lola, qué triste es figurarse uno que cerrará los ojos para siempre sin haberle dicho nunca ¡madre mía! a la que le dió la vida!" (148)

The overwhelming presence of the absent mother figure in "Carlota Valdés" is not as evident in "Cecilia Valdés," although it is still present and noteworthy. While young Cecilia does not dwell on her missing parents, the *virgencita de bronce* is still forced to answer difficult questions regarding her lineage. Her conversation with the Gamboa sisters constitutes a prime example:

--¿Y tu madre?
--Yo no tengo madre.
--¡Pobrecita! ¿Y tu padre? ¿le tienes?
--Yo no tengo padre. (82)

This questioning leads to Cecilia's frustration. She notes that her mother died "en otra tierra" and firmly adds, "yo no sé otra cosa, y no me pregunten más" (83). Although the absent mother motif appears more frequently in "Carlota Valdés," it is valuable to mention that in the definitive 1882 novel version of *Cecilia Valdés*, (although not in the short story that ends in Cecilia's disappearance), this theme proves twofold as Cecilia gives birth to a daughter and is shortly after thrown into jail for plotting Leonardo's death. Thus, Cecilia's daughter is destined to also grow up motherless, continuing the social cycle in which a poor *mulata*, albeit beautiful, is denied full access to white/creole Havana society, confirming the fact "el contexto social y cultural rechaza cualquier tipo de transformación" and furthermore, that "la mulata ha de ser sacrificada o marginada" (González 543).

It is viable to connect the absence of the maternal figure in both works with the presence of death. As mentioned previously, in "Cecilia Valdés," Chepa shares an anecdotal story of Narcisa's death and Cecilia's "disappearance" follows shortly after. In "Carlota Valdés" the presence of death is overwhelming, including that of the cholera-stricken lover and Carlota herself. As the mother figure can be interpreted as the key to (re)production in nineteenth-century Spanish colonies such as Cuba, a society without a strong, permanent maternal presence can be equated with a society in degradation. According to Sommer, an integral part of the "domestic romance" is the desire to be

fruitful and multiply – women are thus crucial to the formation and growth of new nations. The maintenance of order in the Cuban plantation society of the mid 1800s required a patriarchy in which women held a foundational role and it is no surprise that in literature, if no women are present to literally give birth and raise the new generations, death permeates communities with little or no maternal presence. As Sarah L. Franklin confirms in her book *Women and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Cuba* (2012): “Society’s prescriptions for women were closely tied to *marianismo*, or the idea that women are morally and spiritually superior to men, and the veneration of women, religion and motherhood played an important role in those prescriptions” (21).

The (disrupted) families, or lack thereof, in both “Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés” are confirmed by a maternal void in both works as referenced in the previous pages, and other notable similarities between the two C. Valdés figures include failed romances and elderly female parental guardians. In regards to the subtle *mulataje* in Suárez y Romero’s short story as compared to the more obvious racial connotations in Villaverde’s, scholars such as Kutzenski label *Cecilia Valdés* as the *mulata* figure’s “official entry” into Cuban literature (7). This official entry, however, drew inspiration from earlier, less developed *mulata* figures like the strikingly similar Carlota Valdés. Nineteenth century Cuban literature reflects a nation in formation, and both “Carlota Valdés” and “Cecilia Valdés” trace the representation and reception of non-whites in a slave-based society. This paper proposes that “Cecilia Valdés”/*Cecilia Valdés*, in all of its forms, is a re-write and re-interpretation of the lesser known “Carlota Valdés.” “Carlota Valdés,” then, represents the point of departure for “Cecilia Valdés,” a work that expands and adds to the low societal position and melancholy disposition of Suárez y Romero’s young female protagonist. Foundational nineteenth century antislavery novels, such as the famed *Cecilia Valdés*, continued the melancholy tone inspired by the orphan *mulata* figure of Carlota, a helpless victim of Havana society, and position it more securely and explicitly within the slave and race based Havana during the mid-1800s. Del Monte, credited for the *tertulia*-centered union of Villaverde and Suárez y Romero, initially pleaded – in the early 1830s – for writers to approach the theme of slavery with caution. However, this advice gradually shifted, beginning in late 1835, due largely to the historical moment and the political realities of the time, as the British strengthened their 1817 treaty with Spain and began to pressure the Spanish Cristina government to end the slave trade. Pressure took the form of literature in antislavery narratives like *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1840),¹² *Francisco* (1839), and “Cecilia Valdés”/*Cecilia Valdés*. The works that more aggressively addressed the Cuban slave society took direction from previously published works, and it is highly probable that – due to the similarities between the two texts and the numerous exchanges between the two authors – the famous “Cecilia Valdés”/*Cecilia Valdés* was highly influenced by the work of a “forgotten figure” (González del Valle 253) and a “forgotten” narrative: Suárez y Romero and his “Carlota Valdés.”

NOTES

When referring to the short story, the title will appear in quotation marks, and when referring to the definitive novel version of 1882, the title will appear in italics. When referring to the work as a whole, I will either represent the work in its final novel form (italics), or write “Cecilia Valdés”/*Cecilia Valdés* to show I am referring to all editions of the work.

² Although this marks the first and original publication of “Carlota Valdés,” the published version to which I will later make reference is the one published in Suárez y Romero’s *Colección de artículos* (1859). To my knowledge, the original publication of “Carlota Valdés” is only available via microfilm at a limited number of universities in the United States and it has not yet been digitized.

³ Other well-known sources of publication around this time, including newspapers and magazines, included *Miscelánea de útil y agradable recreo* and *El Faro Industrial*. Early in his career, Villaverde published in both of these outlets, as well as *El Álbum* (Bueno 229). Another publishing advantage of the young authors who attended the *tertulia* was the fact that yet another common *tertulia* attendee, Ramón de Palma, managed *El Álbum* during the years 1838 and 1839 (Aguilera Manzano 75).

⁴ Both authors can also be considered “one-hit wonders” of sorts. Marshall E. Nunn published an article titled “Obras menores de Cirilo Villaverde,” which mentions nearly all of his works with the exception of the famous *Cecilia Valdés* (the only non “obra menor”). For Villaverde, *Cecilia* took center stage in his literary career, before and after his death, much like *Francisco* did for Suárez y Romero.

⁵ A key literary figure in nineteenth century Cuba, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda lived in Spain from 1836-56, during the *tertulia*’s most productive and influential period. It is largely due to her geographical location that *Sab* was published in Spain in 1841. Although the setting and theme of *Sab* fits well within the parameters of national literature seeking to foment a Cuban consciousness as the *delmontinos* sought to do, her residence in Spain prohibited her from taking part in the del Monte *tertulia*.

⁶ There is also an earlier novel version of *Cecilia Valdés*, on which the 1882 novel expands. The 1839 short story “Cecilia Valdés” constitutes the first two parts of the 1839 novel version. The 1882 publication *Cecilia Valdés* builds on these two earlier versions, but the author makes significant alterations. In this way, the final publication is better defined as a rewrite than an addition to earlier versions. While there are numerous character name changes and stylistic revisions, important themes such as slavery are also approached differently in the final novel version. See Luis’ study on Villaverde in *Literary Bondage* for an in-depth comparison of the multiple versions of Villaverde’s prize text.

⁷ Villaverde’s definitive publication of the novel *Cecilia Valdés* in 1882 in New York included the subtitle “Novela de costumbres cubanas,” pointing to the costumbrista character of the text (Rosell 15).

⁸ Worthy of mention is yet another costumbrista chapter in *Colección de artículos*, this one titled “Vigilancia de las madres.” Although the story does not confront the realities of slavery in nineteenth century Cuba, the inclusion of “Vigilancia” in the collection is important, considering the motherless status of Carlota Valdés, and it draws attention to the lack of this imperative figure in the life of the young protagonist Carlota. Suárez y Romero shares his belief in “Vigilancia” that, when considering the rearing of respectable, responsible young women, “casi todo es debido á la reprehensible apatía de las

madres” (22).

⁹ There are a few key divergences between the two short stories that should be addressed. These include, but are not limited to, the fact that Carlota dies whereas Cecilia disappears, and “Carlota Valdés” boasts a first person narrator and “Cecilia Valdés” an omniscient, third person narrator. Addressed later in the paper is another important difference regarding the development of the protagonists’ race in both stories.

¹⁰ This possible link to the Lazaro neighborhood of Havana, which, in fact, refers to a 14-block street near the city center, could be another subtle reference to Carlota’s race as the street was and continues to be an important hub for Afro-Cuban religion and culture.

¹¹ Although the author’s last name is not Valdés, and thus there is no direct link to the Casa-Cuna, there is another C.V. figure whose initials should not be forgotten: the author of *Cecilia Valdés*, Cirilo Villaverde.

¹² Juan Francisco Manzano’s famous autobiography was first published in 1840 in English, translated by Richard Madden. The title of this original publication of the work is “Life of a Negro Poet.”

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