

## Practices of the Plantation in *La loma del ángel*

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Reinaldo Arenas's 1987 *La loma del ángel* 'Angel Hill,' a parody of Cirilo Villaverde's nineteenth-century abolitionist classic *Cecilia Valdés*, is among the celebrated Cuban author's least criticized novels, perhaps because it represents a stylistic and thematic departure from his best-known works.<sup>1</sup> It is among the few works in Arenas's corpus that directly addresses issues of racial politics in Cuba in directly taking on Villaverde's canonical novel, and in so doing, offers a pointed social criticism of the repetition of cycles of oppression throughout Cuban history. As a satirical recreation of a foundational Cuban work of abolitionism, *La loma del ángel* captures both the theme of rewriting, symbolized in its adoption of the source text's subtitle, and the metaphorical and literal recurrence of the plantation system into the post-revolutionary period. Central sections of both *Cecilia Valdés* and *La loma del ángel* take place on the aristocratic Gamboa family's sugar plantation, where the authors depict the violent abuses and oppressive practices of slave labor with vivid and condemnatory descriptions. While most analyses of *La loma del ángel* focus on various aspects of the author's criticisms of slavery, allegories of Castro's post-revolutionary Cuba, or on the author's carnivalesque use of language, the novel has rarely been considered in the context of Arenas's writing on the plantation in other literary genres. This article analyzes the plantation in *La loma del ángel* in light of what theorists of Caribbean cultural practices portray as the repetitive continuity among the cultures of the Caribbean organized around the plantation. The plantation both distills the most violent and divisive aspects of the slaving society and its inheritances, and inspires the Caribbean's unique cultural expression that responds to the plantation's oppression. In the context of Arenas's corpus, the

repetitive vacillation between the restrictive centripetal force of the plantation and the artistic creativity that challenges its boundaries criticizes more than just Cuba's slaving history. By considering *La loma del ángel* together with Arenas's writing on the plantation in his autobiography, his poetic work *El central*, and his comments in interviews and essays, this study analyzes the novel's controlling theme of the cyclical nature of oppression, which is only interrupted by creative spectacle.

This article argues that *La loma del ángel* demonstrates Arenas's circular and fatalistic historical vision, in which the exploitive plantation system reappears in different forms through Cuban history. Arenas's chosen genre of literary parody represents this repetition on a textual level, while his satire interrupts the source text by ridiculing its figures of authority, privileging marginal characters, and disrupting mechanisms of social progress presented in the nineteenth-century novel. Using theoretical work on the plantation in the Caribbean by Fernando Ortiz, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Antonio Benítez Rojo, and Édouard Glissant as well as Arenas's other writing on the plantation and its impact in Cuba, this analysis shows that in *La loma del ángel*, public artistic expressions such as dance, music and literature represent a powerful but fleeting antidote to the abuses of this system, where subjects find the opportunity, however limited, to exercise creative freedom as a counterpoint to tyranny.

### The Plantation in Cuban Cultural History

It is impossible to discuss Cuban history without reference to the elaboration of the sugar industry. Sugar accompanies Cuba's history from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries and stands in as a cultural symbol of those political and social forces that have guided the island's trajectory since Spanish colonization. As Moreno Fraginals and Benítez Rojo argue in their works on the subject, the sugar plantation is both the site of economic progress and liberty, as well as the symbol of slavery and the exploitation of enslaved bodies for economic gain. In the context of Cuban theorization of the plantation and the sugar mill, the plantation represents both the synthesis of a Cuban national culture, for example, in Ortiz's seminal essay on transculturation, and the representation

of Cuba's agricultural and economic dependence on colonial and then foreign capital, reproduced through the enslavement of black bodies to white masters. Arenas has commented on the sugar mill and the plantation in novel, poem and essay form, examining the cultural impact of the plantation from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Throughout Arenas's work in which the sugar plantation appears, the plantation functions as a synecdoche for the island. For the author, the plantation, and by extension Cuba, cycles through periods of authoritarian rule and persecution broken by brief, explosive challenges to the systems of power. However, the effects of the characters' defiance of authority are short-lived; in each case, the systematic abuses that they suffer appear again throughout history.

Previous critics of *La loma del ángel* have recognized in the text Arenas's criticism of social realities of the nineteenth century that continue to have effects through the end of the twentieth, such as racial oppression, sexual excess, and idealized miscegenation (Olivares, Manzari), with the intent to comment upon both the arbitrariness and the creativity of the history-writing process. The novel's parodic elements point to an interplay between this commentary and its overarching drive toward freedom represented in the freeing of the text from its predecessor, using techniques of "blackening" the text (Olivares) or privileging the female characters as driving the plot forward (Manzari). However, the novel also evidences a broader scope of its cultural parody and historical critique than simply Villaverde's work or Cuba's colonial history. In *La loma del ángel*, the plantation scenes function as a metaphor that not only references the continuities in abuses of power that the author observes through Cuba's history, but also provides a sarcastic and perhaps bitter commentary upon Cuba's official post-revolutionary rhetoric celebrating a new kind of abolitionism, freeing the nation from an oppressive political and social legacy.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Villaverde's abolitionist work, Arenas's comic exaggerations, introduction of anachronistic characters, and fantastic events unhinge the novel from its ostensible setting in the 1820s and allow it a much broader scope of critique.

The majority of both Villaverde's and Arenas's novels, focused around the intersecting love triangles among the aristocratic Leonardo Gamboa, the beautiful *mulata* Cecilia Valdés, Leonardo's

supposed future wife Isabel Ilincheta, and the free *mulato* José Dolores Pimienta, takes place primarily in the urban setting of Havana, where the overlapping social circles of slaves and their white masters, and the rising free black and *mulato* class threaten to reveal the central secret of the novel: that Cecilia and Leonardo share the same father. The novel ends when Leonardo is murdered by his rival for Cecilia's affections and Cecilia, confined to a convent, gives birth to his illegitimate child, sending the message that slavery impedes Cuba's social progress. The social barriers set in place by the slavery system threaten and eventually undermine *Cecilia Valdés's* central project of whitening through miscegenation, resulting in a tragic end for each of the protagonists. In sharp contrast to the urban social scenes, the section of chapters set in the rural areas dramatizes the horrific and violent abuses that slaves on a sugar plantation suffered, and according to William Luis, serves as the central element in Villaverde's abolitionist message (17). The characters' time on the sugar plantation is also the portion of the novel where Leonardo's father's secret indiscretions come closest to being revealed, and bring into relief the organizing metaphor of racial mixing as a positivist projection of Cuba's future, and a solution to the "race problem" of a post-slavery society. Arenas's version undermines and ridicules each of these aspects of Villaverde's work: on one hand, it provides an alternative narration to the whitewashed viewpoint of Villaverde's source text through its privileging of marginal characters, and on the other, suggests no definitive solution to the aristocratic concentration of power and its associated abuses. Throughout Arenas's novel, the black and *mulato* characters stage both small and significant acts of subversion. However, *La loma del ángel* ends similarly to Villaverde's novel, with the narrator's indifferent confirmation of Cecilia's incarceration after the birth of her whitened daughter, without a generalized suggestion of any sort of systematic solution to the suffering of the characters. Devoid of Villaverde's tragic tone, *La loma del ángel's* ridiculing of those in power does not signal a way toward national progress, but rather emphasizes how abuses of authority reappear in Cuba's history regardless of the group or individual who wields control.

The two authors' use of the sugar industry to illustrate their denunciations of abusive practices of power serves as part of an

extensive history of theorizing sugar production and its associated cultural practices in Cuba and the greater Caribbean. Fundamental works such as Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940) *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1947) and Moreno Fragnal's *El ingenio: complejo económico social cubano del azúcar* (1964) *The Sugarmill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, 1760-1860* (1976) trace the history of the sugar industry and its associated cultural impact, casting the sugar plantation as a central metaphor in Cuban history for oligarchical political control, forced labor, violent exploitation of the populace, and foreign intervention. This tradition reflects Villaverde's pointed and direct criticism of the abuses implicit in a system that is structured through large-scale absentee landowners, extensive and taxing slave labor, and abusive colonial authorities. Arenas revises this metaphor in *La loma del ángel* in his own section of short chapters entitled "En el campo" 'In the country,' satirizing Villaverde's didacticism and romantically tragic depictions of the suffering of the slaves. *La loma del ángel* comically exaggerates aspects of the plantation descriptions such as the deaths of runaways, the obsessive attention of the slave owners to the operations of the sugar plantation and their own economic gain, and the owners' casual disregard for human suffering. Rather than limit the novel's descriptions to the suffering of the slaves, Arenas's work adds an episode in which hundreds of slaves escape the plantation by means of the steam-powered sugar mill, producing wild and creative dance performances as they attempt to return to Africa. While the slaves ultimately die in their escape, Arenas's discussions of the sugar mill in *La loma del ángel* as well as in essays and his poetic collection *El central* reveal not only a critical posture, but also the possibility for the subjects of oppression to use art as a tool for escape and a weapon against systemic abuses of power.

Arenas's work thus reflects the position of theorists like Benítez Rojo and Glissant, who both argue for the circular repetition of the plantation through time and throughout the islands in the Caribbean, and for artistic creation as a counterpoint to the plantation's violence. In their discussions, both theorists thus converse with Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, in which tobacco represents independence, free labor and local culture while sugar stands as an endorsement of authoritarian and

oligarchical rule facilitated through foreign intervention (55). As Cuba's primary export through the nineteenth century, sugar also justifies the mass importation of African slaves, while additionally serving as the mechanism for new technological innovation, and the creation of a haute-bourgeois sugarocrat class. In Gustavo Pérez Firmat's reading of the *Contrapunteo*, even the language of the sugar mill reinforces Ortiz's analysis of its centrality in the implied economic, political and cultural order of empire:

The 'culture' of sugar... is centripetal, monopolistic. The installations where the sugar cane is processed are called 'centrales'; the fields where it is grown are called 'colonias.' Moreover, since the sugar industry as a whole tends toward the *latifundio*, that is, the accumulation of land in a few hands, it is the agricultural equivalent of empire. The culture of sugar reproduces, on a small, sweet scale, the relation between the exploitive metropolis and the exploited colonies. (56)

Villaverde's pro-abolition and eventually pro-independence politics allow the depiction of the plantation to serve both as condemnation of slavery and a critique of Cuba's position *vis-à-vis* its colonial relationship to Spain, an intersection that Carlos M. Andrés Gil and Doris Sommer have explored.

However, the seeming insularity of both the plantation and the island are belied by a constant circulation of economic goods, agricultural products as well as human labor, introducing a parallel circulation of cultural tropes both through time and through the geographic space of the Antilles that for Glissant and Benítez Rojo are particular and originary to the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> Arenas's parody of Villaverde's foundational Cuban text, therefore, performs the public spectacle of resistance to the inheritance of the plantation that Benítez Rojo argues is the primary feature of Caribbean artistic creation, in the novel's very cannibalism of both Cuban history and Cuban literature. It nonetheless still affirms the plantation structures' repeated resurgence through Cuban history. *La loma del ángel* ingests and then spits out a new but recognizable reading of *Cecilia Valdés* that mocks the cultural pattern that the source text records, but in so doing, refuses to offer a systematic solution to social inequities or a national future of the type that *Cecilia Valdés*

projects. For Benítez Rojo, the very capturing of this paradox is what marks the Caribbean text: “El poema y la novela del Caribe no son sólo proyectos para ironizar un conjunto de valores tenidos por universales; son, también, proyectos que comunican su propia turbulencia, su propio choque y vacío, el arremolinado *black hole* de violencia social producido por la encomienda, la plantación, la servidumbre” (*La isla* xxxiv-xxxv) “The Caribbean poem and novel are not only projects for ironizing a set of values taken as universal; they are, also, projects that communicate their own turbulence, their own clash, and their own void, the swirling black hole of social violence produced by the *encomienda* and the plantation” (*Repeating Island* 27). If artistic production has the unique ability to forestall the violence of the plantation (Benítez Rojo xxvi; Glissant 73) Arenas’s text demonstrates this capacity both through its mockery of Villaverde and through its creative insertions into his new version of *Cecilia Valdés*.

#### The Plantation as Textual Key in *Cecilia Valdés* and *La loma del ángel*

A central plot point of Villaverde’s depiction of the sugar plantation focuses on a group of captured runaways headed by the rebellious figure of Pedro Briche, who once he is brought back to the plantation commits suicide rather than return to slavery. The novel’s setting of the 1820s is a period haunted by the failed Aponte slave rebellion of 1812 (Luis 17), while the long composition of *Cecilia Valdés* in three versions between 1839 and 1882 was also marked by multiple organized slave uprisings, especially 1844’s *La escalera* conspiracy (Sommer “Who Can Tell?” 33; Leante 23). These events, which occur in the shadow of the Haitian Revolution, serve as reminders of the landowning class’s fear of a black population that had surpassed the whites in numbers due to the explosion of Cuba’s sugar market through the nineteenth century (Moreno Fraginals 263). The tension between the demand for labor and the fear of the expanding numbers of slaves is dramatized in plantation owner don Cándido Gamboa’s illegal slave importation business. Arenas mocks Villaverde’s proposed solution of freeing and then incorporating blacks into the national body through whitening (G. Guevara 109), represented in the almost-white Cecilia’s heritage of a gradual erasing

of blackness through multiple generations of miscegenation.<sup>4</sup> Arenas depicts the slaves' resistance to incorporation into the national Cuban body via the very symbol of their captivity as the human machines of the sugar industry—the Gamboas' new steam-powered sugar mill. Arenas's slaves refuse the mechanisms of incorporation, just as the runaways in Villaverde's do, when they take advantage of the new machine to escape the plantation, performing the spectacle of resistance on their way to their deaths.

Drumming and dancing in slave communities, generally only permitted on rest days or holidays, threaten the slave owners through their foreignness, serving as symbols of the slaves' partially controlled or uncontrolled "otherness," since these public performances have the capacity to communicate messages inaccessible to the white ruling class (Munro 30). This subversive, performative subtext is a tradition that Arenas's slaves exemplify in *La loma del ángel's* fantastical recreation of the introduction of the first steam-powered sugar mill to Cuba. When the whole Gamboa family assembles to observe the christening of the expensive new machine, the incompetent sugar master sends for slaves to help him figure out how to operate it when it becomes clogged. The slaves are able to open the steam escape valve, setting the machine in motion, but also sending them flying through the air. Don Cándido blames the English manufacturers for surreptitiously producing a mechanism for the slaves to return to Africa, as thousands take advantage of the newly discovered vehicle for their literal escape:

--¡Eso no es ninguna máquina de vapor, es una treta de ellos para devolver los negros a África!

Oír los negros del central aquella revelación y correr hacia la máquina de vapor fue una misma cosa. En menos de un minuto cientos de ellos se treparon descalzos al gigantesco y candente lomo metálico y al grito de '¡A la Guinea! se introducían por el tubo de escape, cruzando de inmediato, a veces por docenas, el horizonte. (109)

--This is no steam mill, it's a trick to return the slaves to Africa!

For the slaves, hearing that revelation and running to the sugar mill was one and the same thing. In less than a minute,

hundreds of barefoot slaves climbed up the large, red-hot metallic machine and with the shout of “To Guinea!” got into the escape tube, immediately passing beyond the horizon, sometimes by the dozens.<sup>5</sup>

The slaves’ literal release from the conditions of their bondage enables them to perform drummed rhythms and dance moves that would be impossible within the bounds of their captivity: “movimientos, giros y piruetas... mucho más sincopados y audaces que los que podían haber hecho en la tierra” (110) ‘movements, turns and pirouettes... much more rhythmic and audacious than those that they could have done on the ground.’ This performance turns out to be the utmost in Cuban creativity: “un espectáculo fascinante y sin precedentes en toda la historia de la danza (detalle que ya fue certificado por Lydia Cabrera en su libro *Dale manguengue, dale gongoní*)” (110) ‘a fascinating and unprecedented spectacle in all the history of dance (a detail that was certified by Lydia Cabrera in her book *Dale manguengue, dale gongoní*).’ That night, after the new sugar mill has been destroyed, the slaves who remain on the plantation answer the creative signal of their compatriots’ escape, playing their drums in homage to those who have returned to Africa (111). The novel privileges the slaves’ innovations in dance and appeals to the authority of renowned ethnographer of Afro-Cuban culture Lydia Cabrera, thus bringing to the forefront characters and voices of marginalized black and female characters that are sidelined or flatly stereotyped in Villaverde’s work.

In the context of Arenas’s championing of those characters not incorporated into national whitening, the novel’s protagonist, Cecilia herself, is completely absent from the section of the novel that takes place on the plantation, as there is no space for her whitened figure in the sharp dichotomies of black vs. white, slave vs. owner that dominate the scenes of the sugar plantation. Arenas’s satirical treatment of the slaves’ attempt to escape brings to the forefront one of the ironies of the nineteenth-century growth of the Cuban sugar industry: that despite the white oligarchical class’s fear of blackening the Cuban population through the ever-increasing slave and free black population, their demands for labor and the high rate of slave deaths through violence and the punishing labor conditions implied a constant influx of new, illegally imported slaving ships

from Africa. These operations of blackening undermine and negate the whitening that Villaverde and others so strongly advocated. In fact, the deliberate and glaring omissions in Villaverde's novel, such as Cecilia's absence from the plantation, or the narrator's refusal to explicitly confirm the incestuous nature of Cecilia's and Leonardo's relationship, serve as an intercalated narrative phantom, where the racial identities of the characters serve as an epistemological code to the implied social structures in place in nineteenth-century Cuba. As Sommer points out, *Cecilia Valdés* is narrated from the points of view of the white characters, where the mulatto and black characters serve as gatekeepers to knowledge about slavery and abuses of people of color ("Cecilia no sabe" 243), but whose knowledge is only imparted between the lines to the astute reader. Arenas's version of the novel, which twists iconic episodes into hyperbolic absurdity, focuses on precisely those sources of knowledge and creativity that are ignored or silenced in Villaverde's source text. If, as Sommer argues, the structure of Villaverde's work contains an anti-slavery message but structurally reinforces white privilege and fails to imagine a post-abolitionist Cuba (243), Arenas's novel brings to the forefront minor characters not favored by the system of social whitening proposed in Villaverde's work, using their stories to ridicule to the point of absurdity the positions of those who hold social power.

If Villaverde's text demonstrates the perspective of white Cubans, where the black and mulatto voices—particularly those of slaves—are repressed or absent, Arenas's work highlights figures and populations marginalized in the source text, ridiculing both the sanctity of literary tradition and the socioeconomic classes that the Gamboas represent. The chapters set on the plantation therefore correspond to Arenas's pattern throughout the novel of championing characters who subvert figures and structures of authority, such as Dolores Santa Cruz, the *enloquecida* 'mad' ex-slave who makes a fool of the visiting Condesa de Merlín by stealing her extravagant hair comb and with it her hair; José Dolores Pimienta, who murders Leonardo Gamboa but is never captured or punished; the jealous Nemesia Pimienta, whose goal is to permanently break up Cecilia and Leonardo; and the unnamed black woman who absconds with Don Cándido's long-awaited title of Count from the Spanish crown,

but seeing no use for it, employs the paper as an umbrella until “las letras y el sello real del título se habían borrado completamente” (149) ‘the letters and the royal seal of the title had been completely erased.’ Arenas’s version of Cecilia, Villaverde’s idealized and yet tragic model of whitening, assumes a secondary position by the end of the novel, her fate narrated only through Dolores’s offhanded remark that she rarely appears at her window to call for her illegitimate but even whiter incestuous daughter with Leonardo. In this vein, with Arenas’s ribald humor, the scene with the steam mill exemplifies *La loma del ángel*’s subversion of Villaverde’s work and its canonical position within Cuban letters. His parody dethrones the texts in which Cuban literary history has been enshrined, and proposes alternative historical and literary readings, for example, through Lydia Cabrera’s certification of the creativity of the marginalized in her comically titled work imagined by Arenas as cheering on the slaves (the word *dale* in the fictional title to her book) in their escape.

#### The Plantation as Historical Metaphor in Cuba

The copulation between the sugar mill and slavery—as Ortiz puts it, there was a marriage between sugar and slavery (Ortiz 87)—signals that in the case of Arenas, the sugar mill and its associated forced labor rises beyond the historical specificity of the nineteenth-century plantation slave system to become a cultural sign of the economic and political oppression that Ortiz and Pérez Firmat theorize. Arenas emphasizes the continuity of plantation violence through Cuba’s history in his essays, his long poem *El central* and the chapter of his autobiography devoted to the time he spent on a sugar plantation in 1970 when the UNEAC, for which he was working, sent him to write about the failed national push for Cuba’s ten million ton sugar production.<sup>6</sup> In recounting this experience in his autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (1992) *Before Night Falls* (1993), he emphasizes the parallels between slave labor in the nineteenth century and conscripted labor in the 1970s. In *Antes que anochezca*, however, Arenas points nonetheless to the composition of *El central* during his time on the plantation as his artistic response denouncing the harsh labor conditions, describing the poem as a counterweight to the official celebration of Cuban

productivity he is assigned. Emphasizing the physical difficulties of the work as well as the fact that the cane cutters were there by obligation under the threat of imprisonment, Arenas claims

Ahora yo era el indio, yo era el negro esclavo; pero no era yo solo; lo eran aquellos cientos de reclutas que estaban a mi lado... Muchos se daban un machetazo en una pierna, se cortaban un dedo, hacían cualquier barbaridad con tal de no ir a aquel cañaveral. (*Antes que anchezca* 155)

Now I was the Indian, I was the black slave, and I was not alone. I was one among hundreds of recruits... Many would hack their legs or cut their fingers off with their machetes. They would do absolutely anything to be relieved of working in the sugarcane fields. (*Before Night Falls* 129)

The early shift in Cuba's post-revolutionary policy from seeing sugar production as linked to Cuba's dependence on imperial powers and its economic underdevelopment to viewing it as a source of independence and indigenous economic development (E. Guevara 357; 362) is cuttingly recharacterized in Lilliane Hasson's 1985 interview with Arenas, when he argues that the island had become "una enorme plantación cañera" (Hasson 46) 'an enormous sugar plantation.' Contesting the notion of the post-revolutionary push for the expansion of the sugar industry as a mark of national progress and economic security, Arenas portrays it instead as the atavistic reiteration of a history of which Cuba is unable to exorcise itself.

Arenas repeatedly draws the same kind of parallels among historical moments elsewhere in his writings on the plantation, most caustically in *El central*. In this multi-part work, Arenas's poetic structure bridges the establishment of the Caribbean sugar industry and its cooptation by Cuba's post-revolutionary government, deliberately confusing temporal distinctions. For example, the poem's second part begins with a first-person prose section in the form of a letter to the Crown from a Dominican friar calling for replacing indigenous slavery with African slavery—a clear evocation of Bartolomé de las Casas's infamous proposition—that ends with the declaration that the forced labor of adolescents that the friar invokes is made law on the date of the third of April

of 1964 in La Habana, Cuba (Arenas *El Central* 19-25). In many other passages, images of slaves from past centuries give way to allusions to Arenas's present, such as in his refusal to distinguish between black slaves and revolutionary recruits: "Son negros, son reclutas, son bestias que giran violentas y torpes; fatigadas y torpes; hambrientas y torpes; esclavizadas y torpes" (*El central: Poema* 59) "They are Negroes, they are recruits, they are beasts who turn over, violent and heavy, heavy, heavy with fatigue and hunger, heavy with slavery" (*El central: A Cuban Sugar Mill* 54). The poem thus makes explicit the metaphorical character of the sugar plantation in Cuba's history, where the poetic voice cannot distinguish among the iterations of slavery that the plantation enforces throughout its five-hundred year history.

By placing the first-person poetic voice in the various positions of the enslaved through different eras, the poem enacts its own call to bear witness to the plantation's secrets—a point of connection with *Cecilia Valdés's* central incestuous secret—for a reading public beyond the plantation/ island's boundaries: "No hay nada que decir sobre la libertad en un sitio donde todo el mundo tiene el deber de callarse o el derecho a perecer balaceado... En un sitio donde nada se puede decir es donde más hay que decir" (*El central: Poema* 61) "There is nothing to say about Liberty in a place where everyone has the duty of keeping his mouth shut and the right to die riddled with bullets... A place where nothing can be told is a place where the most must be told" (*El central: A Cuban Sugar Mill* 56). As critic Roberto Valero points out, in *El central*, "todo lo abominablemente imaginable se extiende por la historia de Cuba en torno al central y a la caña" (149) 'Every abominable thing imaginable extends through Cuban history centered around the plantation and sugar cane.' The three divisions of the poem—into the sugar plantation, the city and exile—emphasize that the reaches of the plantation as a political, economic and social system extend far beyond the literal boundaries of its borders, or the temporal boundaries of its complicity in slavery.

The theme of the circular repetition of the plantation reflects both the notion of incest that drives the plots of *Cecilia Valdés* and *La loma del ángel*, and *La loma del ángel's* cannibalistic rewriting of Villaverde's novel. In each case, the new iteration of a past

subject is both different and the same, recognizable to its observers although it appears in a new context. For Arenas, this process of auto-reflection leads to a kind of self-knowledge, as evidenced in the introduction to the novel. Contemplating the enduring weight of Villaverde's work in the Cuban canon, he writes that the trope of incest reveals the "eternal tragedy" of human relations: "su soledad, su incomunicación, su intransferible desasosiego, y, por lo tanto, la búsqueda de un amante ideal que por ello sólo puede ser espejo –o reflejo– de nosotros mismos" (*La loma* 9-10) 'their solitariness, their incommunication, their intransferable unease, and thus the search for an ideal lover that can only be a mirror—or reflection—of ourselves.' The notion of parody as a kind of incest dramatizes the idea of interlinked dependence. The shared parentage of both texts, the repeated history of the plantation, and the literal shared parentage of the characters points to the paradox in Arenas's work of an incessant, even obsessive search for freedom through creativity, and the resurging suppression of that freedom. The vacillation between these two tendencies across Arenas's corpus suggests the fatalistic reverberation of history, whose closed loop is only interrupted by artistic creativity, which for the author is the very "counterpoint" of a history of repeated oppression (Arenas "Una cultura de la resistencia" 38).

### Couplings on the Plantation

While the slaves' performative and creative escape from the Gamboas's plantation via the sugar mill demonstrates the theme of artistic freedom as resistance, *La loma del ángel* also suggests that creative spectacle can serve to reinforce oppressive power, a point that is made clear in *La loma del ángel's* subverting the positivistic trajectory of its source text. In his analysis of Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés*, Benigno Sánchez-Eppler points to the two primary metaphors of progress that function within the nineteenth-century work: the coupling of a black or mulatto woman and a white man, and the marriage of the slave body to the mechanized steam mill on the plantation. For Sánchez-Eppler, the episode of Pedro Briche's suicide represents an escape from his enslaved body serving as yet another piece of the plantation machine; yet the slaves' funerary drumming mourning his death can also be confused with the ritual

consecration of the new steam mill:

the drumbeat that filled the air acts as the ritual agency that unites the celebration of the machine and the suicide of the slave. It simultaneously opens up in the midst of the Cuban plantation an African interstice through which the suicidal slave enacts his passage away from the consequences of coupling his body with the machinery just installed under the auspices of white religion. (Sánchez-Eppler 83)

The sounds of the drum both participate in driving forward the positivistic realization of an industrial future and challenge its foundations. However, the drumming that celebrates the slaves' escape in Arenas's work unequivocally challenges Villaverde's "composite fantasies" (Sánchez-Eppler 85) of miscegenation and mechanized labor. *Cecilia Valdés* shows the anachronism of the slave plantation system, while in *La loma del ángel*, such a positivist future-looking slant is completely absent. The 1987 novel's composition therefore bears the mark of Cuba's post-revolutionary message that the future has arrived with the Revolution, and yet answers back that the past lives on in the repetition of the very cause for the criticisms that Villaverde had made over one hundred years before.

In *La loma del ángel*, the body coupled with the machine gives way to the body radically divorced from machine. The slave bodies, downtrodden and driven only by the overseer's whip (*La loma* 108) turn into the "truly celestial spectacle" (110) which breaks the "coupling" with the literal and the figurative economic machine of the sugar mill. The ephemeral, transitory and temporary nature of the slaves' dance occupies a prominent place in this celebrated episode, and thus serves as the primary source of its innovation. This spectacular and yet fleeting moment of resistance is what marks Cuban culture for Arenas (Arenas "Una cultura de la resistencia" 31). It is no surprise, therefore, that the slaves fail in their escape; Leonardo and Isabel later discover the thousands of slave bodies where they have landed, killed in their flight. The spectacle of the escape, is, further, coupled with the grotesque spectacle of the Gamboa family's Christmas dinner. The celebratory, festival atmosphere contrasts with the subsequent chapters focusing on the orgiastic feasting by both animals and people, reminding

the reader that spectacle may serve to reinforce power as well as resist it. Arenas satirically exaggerates Villaverde's description of the family's lavish celebration juxtaposed with the paucity of the slaves' and other plantation workers' diet. In *La loma del ángel*, the greedy dinner guests snap up the excess of absurd and exotic dishes, pausing only "un instante para retirar de sus piernas las patas de los animales que esperaban entre gruñidos o ladridos su porción" (*La loma* 126) 'an instant to push from their legs the paws of the animals that awaited their portion with grunts and barks.' The animals' "grunts" and "barks" serve as comic signals of greed which reproduce the excessive consumption of their owners, and parody the false "Christian generosity" of a class that treats its pets better than its slaves.

While the spectacle of the slave dances is performed in the air, free from the bonds of captivity, the spectacle of the Christmas dinner results in the family's deaths, after which their bodies become literal parts of the Cuban landscape. After their excessive meal, the guests' bodies swell into great spherical balls that the house is unable to contain. Doña Rosa and her two daughters, the priest, the overseer, the doctor and the sugar master—each a figure of a different realm of authority over the sugar plantation—surpass the confines of the plantation, rolling through the countryside until they crash into a mountain range, becoming permanent features of the island. The text thus suggests that the plantation exceeds its own boundaries, defining the whole island itself. While both the slaves and the authority figures of the plantation end up dead by the time Don Cándido and Leonardo leave the countryside to return to the city, their deaths carry different weights. While the slaves die in a burst of ecstatic creativity, released from the ground to fly through the air, the Gamboas and their fellow operators of the sugar machine die a weighty death, permanently affixed to Cuba's geography.

This dichotomy between internal and external, between looking outward beyond the plantation and looking inward, captures one of Arenas's controlling dynamics between Cuba and the outside world. While still in Cuba, the vast majority of the author's works were smuggled out and published in foreign venues; *La loma del ángel* and *El central* were published during Arenas's exile in the United States. The two opposing scenes of celebration and festivity capture

what is, in Arenas's work on the sugar mill, a constant tension between artistic expression as the ultimate freedom, and artistic expression as signaling oppression, incorporation into the political machine; in short, the coexisting contradictory interpretations of the ritualistic drumming that Sánchez-Eppler analyzes in the coupling of machine and body in *Cecilia Valdés*. While the slaves' radically creative artistic performance represents a momentary protest against the mechanisms of subjugation in *La loma del ángel*, the slaves do not actually escape the island. Their deaths are ambiguous within the novel. On the one hand, Arenas's text is referencing the note in Villaverde's that the slaves believe they will be returned to their homeland upon their deaths. Nonetheless, their deaths mean the importation of more slaves, a continuation and perhaps even reinforcement of the unjust system whereby new recruits are the continuity that keep the sugar machine operating.

The final description of Arenas's return from the sugar mill in *Antes que anochezca* captures this tension-filled contradiction. After the failure of the sugar harvest of 1970, Arenas recounts that the government turned its focus to securing the return of fishermen it accused the CIA of having captured. Their return becomes the cause for celebration that the failed sugar harvest could not bring about, culminating in a festival that calls to mind both the momentary freedom of the slaves and the grotesque excess of the Christmas dinner:

Aquello terminó, como terminan casi todas las tragedias cubanas, en una especie de rumba... Y así, de repente, se le olvidó al pueblo el fracaso de la zafra... Aquello se prolongó durante todo un mes, y hubo cerveza en todos los sitios y se repartía comida en casi todas las esquinas. Había que olvidar a toda costa que se había hecho el ridículo, que todo el esfuerzo de aquellos años había sido inútil y que éramos un país absolutamente subdesarrollado y cada día más esclavizado. (*Antes que anochezca* 158-59)

The drama ended, as do most Cuban tragedies, in a sort of rumba... And so, all of a sudden, the populace forgot the failure of the harvest... This lasted for over a month; there was beer everywhere, and food was distributed at almost every corner.

It was absolutely necessary to forget, by any means, that we had been the butt of a bad joke, that the efforts of all those years had been useless, that we were a completely underdeveloped country, more and more enslaved every day. (*Before Night Falls* 133-34)

The ambiguous tension between the spectacle of resistance and the spectacle that reinforces authority represents another kind of uneasy coupling that links *La loma del ángel* with Arenas's other works. As César Salgado has said of the author's dystopian novel *El asalto* *The Assault*, "there may be an escalating symbiosis between repression and licentiousness, despotism and eroticism, power and spectacle, prohibition and desire" (67). Even as Arenas's work insists on the redemptive power of artistic freedom, that freedom is repeatedly obscured or shut down by the repetition of abusive practices of power in his novels.

Arenas's focus on the explosion of creative potential in the moments between the slaves' release and their ultimate death underscores the idea of art as a response to tyranny. This scene thus also plays with the history of the cultural incorporation of the history of violence and exploitation into nationalized culture expression, pointing to the interplay between art and context for its revolutionary and destabilizing nature, and its potential to be incorporated, synthesized, and thus emptied of its subversive potential. This is another aspect of the author's challenges to the positivistic creation of the future implicit in Villaverde's work. Arenas's depiction of the state-sponsored *fiesta* as a distraction from the nation's failures to produce the promised sugar harvest and as a diversion from the forced labor and scarcity of the post-revolutionary years represents a challenge to the kind of historical or racial synthesis that other depictions of the plantation system employ. In *La loma del ángel*, escape from the plantation machine can only be momentary and situational—for example, in the widespread sexual encounters Arenas describes as taking place in the shadows of state vigilance during the celebrations. In Arenas's work, the pendulum swing between celebration and oppression never resolves itself; the creative endeavor only provides a brief explosion of resistance against a sociopolitical machine that inevitably comes back to power.

When read in the context of Arenas's other writing on the plantation, *La loma del ángel* incorporates the long history of

sugar and the plantation system in the Caribbean, but dismantles the positivistic thrust of previous novelistic and social scientific analyses of its unique and controlling function. For Arenas, the plantation is at once a very real site of exploitation and the symbol of concentrated tyrannical power that repeats itself through distinct moments in Cuba's history. The sugar plantation is also a metaphorical configuration that allows the author to both criticize the exercise of power and violence that emanates from it, as well as emphasize the fleeting explosions of creativity that serve as its only possible counterweight. These creative moments, performative as well as textual, however, do not formulate a new utopia, but rather brief expressions of total freedom that might nonetheless be insufficient to stop the plantation machines that serve as their background. At the end of *El color del verano* 'The Color of Summer,' his novel that narrates the vividly dystopian future, Arenas imagines Cuba disappearing forever into the ocean waters. This is a future foreshadowed through his repeating historical cycles, and one against which art may warn, but might not have the power to prevent.

#### Notes

1 While this text was published in translation to English in 1987 with the title *Graveyard of the Angels*, I am using my own translations of the novel.

2 See Ernesto Che Guevara's article on the sugar mill cited in this study.

3 See especially Glissant's chapter "Closed Space, Open Word" (63-75) and Benítez Rojo's Introduction.

4 Gema Guevara points out, as have other critics, that the kind of miscegenation that *Cecilia Valdés* promotes is fundamentally gendered, almost always represented as between a black or *mulata* woman and a white man. Black and *mulato* men were generally left out of the whitening equation.

5 My translations unless otherwise noted.

6 UNEAC is the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, The Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba.

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