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KATHERINE FORD\*

## Interrogating Cuban Womanhood in Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce*

Abstract

*La virgencita de bronce* (2004), from Cuban playwright Norge Espinosa Mendoza uses actors and puppets to dramatize the classic novel *Cecilia Valdés*, in the process questioning the classic Cuban myth and definitions of Cuban womanhood. Cecilia Valdés is a pivotal figure in Cuban culture, since the days that Cirilo Villaverde first wrote the novel (1839) and Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce*, written at the request of the important Teatro de las Estaciones in the small city of Matanzas, gives the Cuban stage the opportunity to interrogate the national canon developed around Cecilia Valdés in an innovative way.

KEYWORDS: Cuba; Cecilia Valdés; women; puppetry; re-writing

Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce* [*The Bronze Virgin*] (2004) returns to the Cuban classic novel *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde (1839, revised and extended 1882) to interrogate what it means to be a Cuban woman and a Cuban literary classic through the use of puppets. Given the importance of the figure of Cecilia Valdés in the Cuban literature and culture, Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce* offers the reader-spectator the perfect opportunity to examine the re-visioning of a canonical literary text on the national stage. *La virgencita de bronce*, written at the request of the Teatro de las Estaciones in the small city of Matanzas, under the direction of Rubén Darío Salazar, re-examines the canonical Cuban novel to dramatize the story of Cecilia Valdés through puppetry. We look at how theatre returns to its own national canon to create, remember, or distort the definition of national literature and use theatre to provoke a discussion on these topics. In Cuba, the nineteenth-century novel *Cecilia Valdés* offers an important moment that founds a literary and cultural identity that is then used on the stage to re-write that identity. Norge Espinosa Mendoza, an important contemporary figure within the theatrical community in Havana and Cuba more generally, returns to the definition of Cuban

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womanhood embodied in Cecilia Valdés to re-envision national definitions through the use of puppets rather than human beings. This pivotal change provokes a different approach on behalf of the reader-spectator that allows him/her to question these identities. They present an alternate perspective on what it means to rewrite within the national literary canon that offers the reader-spectator a widened definition of this canon and its importance within national, regional and global boundaries.

The title of the play – *La virgencita de bronce* – alludes, of course, to the famous Cuban literary character of Cecilia Valdés. Cirilo Villaverde's novel *Cecilia Valdés* refers to its main character with this nickname throughout the novel. Villaverde's version is the first Cecilia that sparks a national obsession with this figure that is revised in different artistic genres. Cecilia Valdés is a character that has occupied an important place in the national canon. She is the subject of many re-writes and new versions, particularly and perhaps most well-known are the Cuban *zarzuela Cecilia Valdés* written by Gonzalo Roig in 1932 and Humberto Solás's film *Cecilia* (1982).<sup>1</sup> However, both within these three texts and moving beyond them, there are innumerable versions of Cecílias, many of which helped inform the version that Norge Espinosa Mendoza puts forward in *La virgencita de bronce*.<sup>2</sup> Following the script of his play in the Ediciones Alarcos publication, Espinosa Mendoza discusses the various texts that served as inspiration, such as Abelardo Estorino's play *Parece blanca* (1994) and Reinaldo Arenas's novel *La loma del Ángel* (1987). Norge Espinosa Mendoza, then, writes his play within an established tradition of the Cuban literary canon. Espinosa Mendoza (b. 1971) is a well-known figure in the world of Habanero and Cuban theatre. In addition, the first Cuban to participate in the University of Iowa's International Writing Program, he is a poet and cultural critic, often writing on and within the perspective of an LBGT activist. Having worked for many years in the theatre community and adapted various works to the stage, Espinosa turns to a canonical figure in *La virgencita de bronce* in order to examine the effects of this new context and approach.

The figure of Cecilia Valdés is one that has, in many ways, moulded definitions of Cuban beauty and womanhood since its first arrival on the Cuban scene. Cecilia is described in all versions as a light-skinned woman of mixed race, almost white in appearance. Her beauty is attributed in part to

<sup>1</sup> A *zarzuela* is a traditional form of musical comedy from Spain that was also popular in Cuba.

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Bravo Rozas and Almudena Mejías Alonso (2014) present a comprehensive collection of analyses on the incarnations of Cecilia Valdés in *El mito de Cecilia Valdés de la literatura a la realidad*. This edited collection emerged from a conference series dedicated to this Cuban figure and encompasses the breadth of influence of Cecilia Valdés in present-day Cuban culture.

her light complexion, though this is also mixed with her exoticness of not belonging to the upper class from which Leonardo, her lover-brother, comes. He is drawn to her because of her beauty and her sexuality but she is not suitable for him and the world he occupies. It is the very idea of mixing that makes Cecilia such a strong and identifiable character in Cuba, but that also dooms her to tragedy in all her artistic incarnations. Just like the *Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, which will be explored more), Cecilia embodies the different cultures and races that make up Cuba in a way that encourages identification with all that she represents: we want her to succeed. Yet, given the constraints of racism and sexism of colonial culture in Cuba, we know that this will end tragically, as continues to happen in version after version, although her story continues to hold our attention.

*La virgencita de bronce* consists of a prologue and nine scenes, where all the action unfolds with puppets, a reality that may seem to indicate an infantilization of the material but actually is the exact opposite. In fact, the theatre of Teatro de las Estaciones, the company that commissioned Espinosa Mendoza's play, presents puppet theatre that specializes in presenting material from a perspective that challenges characterizations such as these.<sup>3</sup> As we see, this play is anything but an infantile version of *Cecilia Valdés*. Espinosa's version of Cecilia Valdés is not melodramatic or Romantic, as the original may be seen, but instead satirical and exaggerated. The prologue lays out the basic tension of the play: that don Cándido is the father of the infant girl who will grow up to be Cecilia Valdés and demands that Cecilia's grandmother, Chepilla, keep this a secret. The following scenes portray a young, beautiful woman, very pale in complexion, and reveal that she and Leonardo, Cándido's son, have fallen in love (though this version primarily emphasizes the sexual nature of this relationship at this point). Despite Leonardo's desires, his parents try to marry him to Isabel Ilincheta, the daughter of a wealthy coffee plantation owner. Leonardo pursues Isabel while professing his love for Cecilia, which they consummate. Propelled by the horror of what may happen, Cándido reveals to his wife, Rosa, that he is Cecilia's father and the two conspire to marry Leonardo and Isabel immediately. This new development is revealed to Cecilia and she calls upon her admirer Pimienta to kill Isabel with his tailor's scissors. In the final scene – that of the wedding between Leonardo and Isabel – Pimienta enters and kills his rival for Cecilia's love. The play closes with a bitter exchange between Pimienta and Cecilia and then the slaves place Isabel's bloody veil on Cecilia and put her in the crib that had occupied a part of the scene throughout the play.

<sup>3</sup> Teatro de las Estaciones is a fascinating theatre group that challenges the definitions of theatre, as outlined in Germán Aguilar (2014) and Almarales Monier (2016).

Norge Espinosa Mendoza's play follows close upon the established plotline of the other versions of Cecilia Valdés, though it emphasizes the erotic nature of the nineteenth-century Cuban plot and uses puppets to portray this. The idea of a literary canon that attempts to found and define the nation, as we can see in the use of Cecilia Valdés, is explored in depth in Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991). Here, Sommer attempts to respond to the Boom writers' assertion that they had few literary predecessors worth reading. Instead, these authors dismiss the earlier writers and claim themselves to be cultural figures of independence. Sommer questions this presentation by focusing her attention, and that of her reader's, on the nineteenth century and the novels that the Post-Independence period produced. She finds that through the marriage of love and patriotism these texts help to consolidate the state and its inhabitants. The role of these novels, Sommer maintains, is to construct a national history that can both fill in the gaps in the young nations and can direct them towards an ideal. In this way, she reminds us of Andrés Bello's affirmation that narrative should be used as a teaching tool (1991: 8-9).

Inherent in the novels that Sommer explores and in *La virgencita de bronce*, the reader-spectator already finds re-writing, given the points of inspiration that they have. This "passionate investment I/we have in nationalism" (xi) that Sommer identifies in her text has many roots in English and French novels (as well as American as seen in her second chapter on James Fenimore Cooper), although in the Latin American version the resolution to the romances is often righted and the love triangle simplified. Furthermore, the relationship between the lovers changes to make the two more interdependent and their feminine and masculine roles more ambiguous, thus creating a situation that is more conducive to the family – the stabilizing element of the state and also justifies the presence of romance in the national canon. Race also becomes an important issue in the Latin American novels that is absent in their European counterparts, although the positionings of the novelists shifts according to the novel's setting and the project that each one wants to put forth.

While Doris Sommer examines novels from the nineteenth century that unquestionably shift form a national canon, Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce* melds two literary genres and centuries, and rather than emulate a past example, Espinoza Mendoza is interrogating what this past example has done for Cuban culture and womanhood. In this way, in the words of Roberto González Echevarría in *Myth and the Archive*, the very fact that *Cecilia Valdés* is rewritten is what determines its importance: "What determines the centrality of these works is their rewriting or their being rewritten" (1998: 40). However, I believe there is more to the response



than the circularity inherent here. Hidden within the first Cecilia Valdés and its rewrites is an examination of the past and the present's interpretation of that past in order to widen definitions of national identity and to urge the reader-spectator to challenge traditional ideas of the nation. This can be seen in Espinosa Mendoza's re-visioning of what Cecilia Valdés means and how it can be used to create a national future.

*La virgencita de bronce* mixes literary genres by borrowing from a novel and acknowledging various other revisions. While this intertextuality is common in literature, we must take note of the fact that this is not simply a conversation of literary texts but that there is a translation of genre here – non-theatrical texts are converted into theatre. This is important to consider in order to understand how the dramatic texts change or, perhaps enhance, the originals. To think about this question, we should consider the differences between theatre and other literary genres. Theatre is of course a collaborative genre – written to be adapted according to the interpretations and needs of the theatre group presenting it and to whom they are producing the work, whereas the other literary genres often reach publication (the ultimate endpoint) as the product of one person. The final product of a play will be the result of many different endpoints (the theatrical text, the spectacle or spectacles) and perspectives (the playwright, the director, the producer, the actors). By making literature theatrical, the playwright pushes and challenges these definitions to incorporate other points of view on what is theatre. The conversation on theatre and the texts in question widens to include new ideas whereas the discussion of the text in question reaches beyond the limits of the original to find a new audience and point of view.

While the final pages of Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce* publicly acknowledge the role of the earlier versions of *Cecilia Valdés*, the entire text emphasizes Espinosa Mendoza's indebtedness to the other Cecílias. This is an important point that is not left to chance but is repeated again and again throughout the play. This is first underlined twice in the opening scene: first, with the introduction of the music from Roig's *zarzuela* that scores the change of scenery from a black backdrop to that of Havana in 1832 and second just a few moments later with the entrance of Leonardo into the open-air market where everyone is anticipating Cecilia's entrance. All the characters on the stage prepare to greet her with words from the *zarzuela*:

*Leonardo, como un maestro de ceremonias, se dirige a todos, leyendo los siguientes versos de un libro que aparece repentinamente, o que lo sostiene Tirso, y en cuya portada puede leerse Cecilia Valdés, comedia lírica, 1932.*

(Espinosa Mendoza 2004: scene 1, 27-8)

[Leonardo, as the master of ceremonies, directs everyone, reading the following verses from a book that appears suddenly, or that Tirso holds up, and on whose cover can be read Cecilia Valdés, lyric comedy, 1932].<sup>4</sup>

This stage direction precedes an exchange that comes directly from Roig's *Cecilia Valdés* (much like the final scene of *La Virgencita de bronce* which is also a quote from the *zarzuela*), highlighting the creation of a performance within the play. This double layer of performativity underlines the role of re-visioning within Norge Espinosa Mendoza's version of Cecilia Valdés since he both pays homage and pokes fun at this construction. While he does aim to honour the *zarzuela* with these references, he also provokes laughter in his reader-spectator that will allow them to question the purpose of this re-visioning of the national classic and how he challenges their ideas of Cecilia, femininity and *cubanía*.

Nowhere is this humour more evident than in Espinosa's borrowing of the many incarnations of Cecilia Valdés. This can be seen in the way that the characters emphasize the creation of a story within *La virgencita de bronce*, many times in an effort to remember the past Cecílias but also as a way to provoke laughter. This double goal can be seen in the following exchange where Cecilia hints at the fact that any romantic relationship between her and Leonardo would be illicit, while another character jests that the suspense of the story has been ruined: "Ah, damn, someone gave away the end!" ("¡Ah, cará, ya alguien le contó el final del libro!", Espinosa Mendoza 2004: 30). While this is a humorous moment that lightens the tension of the meeting between Cecilia and Leonardo, it also hints at the many layers of rewriting within this story. Cecilia, who does not know she is Leonardo's half-brother, alludes to this familial relationship that would make repulsive any romantic link between the two; the sentence highlights what she does not know by suggesting what the audience does know. There is a double play here that takes advantage of the original story and its importance in Cuban cultural production. In this way, Norge Espinosa Mendoza plays both sides of the story of Cecilia Valdés in an effort to remember the original stories and to acknowledge the role of Cecilia outside of the literary pages. Furthermore, the implication that any Cuban would not already know the love story of Cecilia Valdés is laughable in itself and points to the importance of this character and story in the creation of a Cuban national definition, as we will examine here.

While much of the humour emanates from the borrowing of Roig's *zarzuela*, it is not the only version of *Cecilia Valdés* that Norge Espinosa Mendoza references in his version. *La virgencita de bronce* also returns to

<sup>4</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

the narrative version of the story remembering directly Villaverde's original, and, in the process, alluding to Estorino's *Parece blanca* [*She Looks White*]. The reader-spectator sees this in what almost becomes a slogan throughout the play: "Let it be what Villaverde wants!" ("¡Y qué sea lo que Villaverde quiera!", Espinosa Mendoza 2004: 7, 60), though it sometimes changes and Cecilia herself becomes the equivalent of the original author: "Let it be what Villaverde and the Virgin want!" ("¡Qué sea lo que Villaverde y La Virgencita quieran!", 67). These sentences show the level of status that the novel, the character and the author have reached and their centrality to Cuban literature and culture. They determine what will happen: "That's what the novel says" ("Así lo dice la novela", 60). While these references directly remember Villaverde's novel, the use of Villaverde's name and of the novel so explicitly alludes to Estorino's use of the novelist and novel in his theatrical version of *Cecilia Valdés*. Estorino's *Parece blanca* features metatheatrical elements that humoristically point out the debt that his play owes to the various versions of *Cecilia*. Espinosa's *La virgencita* borrows these very metatheatrical comments, creating an even more intricate and funny circle without even directly referencing Estorino's play. All of the allusions in these passages reveal why Espinosa Mendoza returns to this story and also allow the reader-spectator to comprehend his innovation of this sacred text. Hidden within the quotes and reverent references to other versions of *Cecilia Valdés*, Norge Espinosa Mendoza validates the national literary canon and the Cuban experience.

Complicit with the humour analysed in *La virgencita de bronce*, Norge Espinosa Mendoza chooses to represent some of his characters in an exaggerated way that emphasizes the excess on one side of the colonial system, many times in ways that emphasize the erotic excess of this portrayal.<sup>5</sup> Leonardo's parents, *don* Cándido and *doña* Rosa are represented as excessive creatures in their appetites: Rosa gorges any food around her (33; 48) while she spoils her son by giving him gold coin after gold coin (21; 34); Cándido cannot resist most young female bodies that surround him (48) and smokes incessantly (21). These over-the-top characterizations of this couple are joined with a presentation of Leonardo and Cecilia as two lustful youths that, rather than being deeply in love, are attracted to one another physically (54-5). Furthermore, both characters are described in a disparaging manner that challenges their position as paragons of Cuban man and womanhood. With Leonardo, he is presented as a "young white man, a pretentious flirt. Lady killer. 'Distant eyes, perfect mouth'".<sup>6</sup> The adjectives

<sup>5</sup> "*La virgencita* is a serious farce charged with sexual energy" (Lisenby 2012: 91).

<sup>6</sup> "joven criollo, pretencioso y picaflor. La perdición de las damas. 'Ojos lejanos, boca perfecta'" (21).

used here emphasize his superficiality; he presents a danger in that he is not constant nor worth the effort. He is all façade. Cecilia, in turn, the very definition of the ideal Cuban woman, in *La virgencita de bronce* is a “coarse, splendid, scheming, beautiful and capricious *mulata*”.<sup>7</sup> Just like Leonardo in Espinosa Mendoza’s version, she is beautiful but empty. Both of these characters are shallow in their character and in their affection for one another. This presentation is seconded by an over-arching feeling within the play that the majority of the characters are unable to control their desires and are not objects of ideal Cubanness despite their iconic status within the literary and cultural canon. These portrayals, then, humanize these important Cuban types and re-envision what their place and meaning is within Cuban cultural production.

Hovering over this entire play, from the very title to the protagonist, is the spectre of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba, another central female figure that has defined Cuban womanhood. This manifestation of the Virgen, particularly identified with Cuba, is an important parallel made in the play, and with many of the versions of Cecilia Valdés. The legend of the Virgen details her appearance to three slaves, colloquially referred to as the *tres Juanes*, working in the local copper mines. The story tells that in the beginning of the seventeenth century, three men, one African and two indigenous brothers, went out on the sea. They found something floating in the water and, when they reached it, saw that it was an image of the Virgen with the baby Jesus in her arms (the image that is now associated with her) with the words “I am the Virgen de la Caridad” (“Yo soy la Virgen de la Caridad”). In the Santería religion associated with Cuba and that draws on the Yoruba religion together with the Catholic faith, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre corresponds to the god Oshún; this comes in part from the fact that the two share the same feast day (September 8), but can also be seen in the many syncretic connections between the two religions. Race is central to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre in that, first, she appears to three slaves, one African and two indige-

<sup>7</sup> “mulata zafia, rumbosa, refistolera, bella y caprichosa” (ibid.). Cirilo Villaverde’s description in the original *Cecilia Valdés* is extensive and exhaustive, ending however with “such were her strange beauty, happiness, and vivacity that they coated her with a kind of enchantment, not allowing the spirit to roam but to admire her and ignore the lack or excess of her lineage. She was never seen to be sad, never to be in a bad mood, never to fight with anyone; nor did anyone know where she came from or how she supported herself” (“tales eran su belleza peregrina, su alegría y vivacidad, que le revestían de una especie de encanto, no dejando al ánimo vagar sino para admirarla y pasar de largo por las faltas o por las sobras de su progenie. Nunca la habían visto triste, nunca de mal humor, nunca reñir con nadie; tampoco podía darse razón dónde moraba ni de qué subsistía”, 73-4).

nous. Furthermore, she is oftentimes depicted as darker either in hair, eyes or skin, in a departure from other representations of Mary that are more strictly European. In this way, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is meant to more closely resemble those to whom she appeared, something that we also see in the Virgen de Guadalupe. The fusion in this image allows for new manifestations of the religious image – it is a re-writing of the very image of the Virgin Mary, a revising that is seen in the syncretism of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and Oshún.

Given this significant historical and social context, it is obvious why the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is used as a reference for Cecilia Valdés, since this connection weaves Cecilia into the fabric of *cubanía*. However, the allusion is telling in Norge Espinosa Mendoza's play in that he is connecting Cecilia, a biracial nineteenth-century character who is neither religious nor virginal with a manifestation of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. This irreverent association mixes secular icons with religious in a way that connects these two different aspects of Cuban cultural production, while also rewriting their meaning – both Cecilia and the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre are changed through this process. In many ways, this connection between the two female figures that emerges from Espinosa Mendoza's text creates a new text, borrowing words from José Quiroga and his study of the palimpsest in the Cuban context: "It is a queer form of reproduction, one where two texts, two sites, two lives, blend into one continuous present" (2005: ix). This re-creation, or re-writing is a common trait in Cuban cultural production as Quiroga maintains: "the island is always being reinvented somewhere else" (xi). Nevertheless, the association or fusion of these two iconic figures of the feminine within Cuba hints at the overall rewriting in this play and how this re-visioning of two central Cuban female figures attempts to widen acceptable definitions of femininity and race within national definitions of identity.

Although Cecilia Valdés is one of the most re-written figures, and a character who attempts to re-write her own past and future, she is unable to escape her past in all her incarnations. Throughout Norge Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce*, her origins are constantly in the minds of the reader-spectators through the presence of one prop that occupies an important place because of its omnipresence on the stage: the crib.<sup>8</sup> Starting with the very first scene and remaining on the stage until the end of the play, the crib that the baby Cecilia had occupied comes to take on a central meaning within the story. This begins with the prologue when her grandmother and her father discuss her fate. At this point, the baby Ce-

<sup>8</sup> David Lisenby analyses the use of the crib in Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce* along that of the prop of Villaverde's novel onstage in Estorino's *Parece blanca*.

Cecilia has been left at the Real Casa Cuna, in an effort to hide her paternity and to pass her off as white, which, in the words of David Lisenby “inhibits a happy ending” (2012: 234). The crib here, occupied by Cecilia is in the background, giving the impression that she and it are at the orphanage (Espinoza Mendoza 2004: 23). The crib remains in the same place on the stage throughout the play and the characters, while not referring directly to the crib, often focus their attention plainly on this piece of furniture.

The crib occupies the figurative centre of activity at the end of the play after Leonardo has been killed and Cecilia has been dressed in the bloody veil and symbolically and literally returned to the beginning:

*Al tiempo que se oyen los acordes del cierre, los actores salen a la vista del público y, cuidadosamente, toman a Cecilia, devolviéndola a la cuna del proscenio, a la que cubren con el propio velo, y que sigue iluminada débilmente hasta que, con el último y grandioso golpe de música, se pierde definitivamente en la penumbra del apagón final. (68)*

*[As the closing chords are heard, the actors come out onstage and carefully pick up Cecilia, returning her to the crib in the proscenium and they cover it with its own veil, as it is still weakly lit until, at the last, magnificent chord, it disappears into the darkness of the final curtain.]*

Cecilia is returned by her fellow characters to the very place that she began the play, in a space of in-betweenness where she is neither one race nor the other, neither an orphan nor of the family. This suspension between definitions *is* the very definition of Cecilia.

One of the most important aspects of this play is the innovation of presenting the story of Cecilia Valdés through puppetry in addition to using live actors on the stage. This decision leaves the reader with many questions: how does this classic Cuban story change when puppets retell the doomed love between Leonardo and Cecilia? Is it inevitable that the story devolves into a farce of what the original is? Is this the very purpose of Espinoza’s use of puppets? While some of these questions would be answered by the performance that the spectator would view, these are still important for this analysis in that they would be solved by the director, producer, etc., and thus are still part of the presentation.

Cuba has a strong tradition of puppet theatre as evidenced in the Teatro Nacional de Guíñol (TNG), a highly successful national theatre company founded in Havana in 1963, at a historical point when all cultural institutions were sanctioned by the Revolutionary government. The Teatro Nacional de Guíñol enjoys critical and popular acclaim in Cuba and abroad and points to an important foundation from the decade of the 1960s and both before and after. This theatre company is just one part of the long

practice of puppet theatre in Cuba that both predates TNG and follows it.<sup>9</sup> While much of the theatre associated with puppetry is aimed at children, not all is, as we see with the example of Espinosa Mendoza's *La virgencita de bronce*. This is without a doubt not a play intended for a young audience. In this way, the reader-spectator sees that the author specifies puppets for a different reason or reasons, such as parody or satire. As Federico López Terra argues: "It is a matter of intending/hoping to bind the ancient tradition of puppet theatre as spectacle for adults with the contemporary scene, which assumes a revaluation of this particular subgenre as a dramatic spectacle in general."<sup>10</sup> What's more, in a further effort that emphasizes one of the play's purposes and the general amalgamation that we find repeatedly here, it features both puppets and actors: "Four slaves (actor-manipulators)."<sup>11</sup> As Erin Finzer points out, the written text only mentions these characters in passing, though their importance can be seen in the performance of the play (2015: 41). Here this is a blending of borders that provokes a questioning that is characteristic of *La virgencita de bronce*, while simultaneously forcing the reader-spectator to understand the role of race and slavery in the definition of Cuban culture and history.<sup>12</sup> The silent actors play the pivotal role of slaves, manipulating the objects on stage in a seemingly overlooked role that speaks volumes through its silence.

The characters portrayed in Espinosa Mendoza's story of Cecilia Valdés are such icons within Cuban culture that their portrayal with puppets problematizes this idolization. Furthermore, the characters' behaviour in the play is ridiculous and exaggerated, a fact that puppetry complicates even more. Seeing a puppet gorge itself on food or licentiously attack another is not erotic or relatable but instead over the top and laughable. In this way, the reader-spectator is encouraged to interrogate this Cuban classic and its place within the production of culture. Cecilia is not a role model or an unattainable dream but a puppet put into ridiculous situations by her own decisions and those forced on her by others. Thus, Norge Espino-

<sup>9</sup> Norge Espinosa Mendoza (2011) presents a comprehensive and fascinating overview of the history of puppet theatre in Cuba from 1949-2011, archived on Cuban Theater Digital Archive.

<sup>10</sup> "Se trata de una obra que pretende religar la tradición más antigua del teatro de títeres como espectáculo para adultos con la escena contemporánea, lo que supone una revaloración de este particular subgénero como espectáculo dramático en general" (2011: 307). Federico López Terra presents a detailed analysis of the use of puppets in *La virgencita de bronce* that interrogates the layers of writing in the myth of Cecilia Valdés and the construction of theatrical genre in the use of puppets.

<sup>11</sup> "Cuatro esclavos (actores-manipuladores)" (22).

<sup>12</sup> Erin Finzer presents a fascinating analysis of the role of melancholia in *La virgencita de bronce*, examining the role of race and absence in this iconic figure and story.

sa Mendoza encourages a questioning of a literary icon in his portrayal and presentation of his version of Cecilia, a version that lines up in many ways with the other accepted ideas of the character but deviates in some meaningful portrayals.

The multiple versions of literary Cecílias that are discussed here are perpetuated within Norge Espinosa Mendoza's play at two distinct moments when Cecilia as the main character is fragmented into various different images, visually replicating the fragmented multiplicity that has emerged around this figure in Cuban literary culture. The first one comes in the second half of the play after Cecilia has been urged to give up Leonardo and immediately before she and Leonardo consummate their relationship. The scene begins with Cecilia being left alone onstage. This act of parting highlights Cecilia's solitude as well as her uniqueness in that, in her lowest moment, she has no one to guide or listen to her. The physical isolation of the puppet Cecilia mirrors the mental seclusion she feels and to which she has been relegated by her father, her grandmother, and Leonardo in that the first two do not share their knowledge of her parentage with her and the final one abandons her for a more 'suitable' and rich bride.

When Cecilia is left alone onstage, she calls to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre to return Leonardo to her or she will go crazy, at which point she begins to cry against a broken mirror: "*The mirror shows her images: all replicas of Cecilia, but disfigured by her desperation. She is tormented by the images*".<sup>13</sup> This is an especially important moment within the play and within the tradition of Cecilia Valdés in that Espinosa Mendoza focuses the attention of the reader-spectator on the inner torment of the protagonist, making it physically real through the broken mirror and the disfigured replications of Cecilia. Just as a movie spectator may see an angel and a devil urging a character to choose a particular path, here multiple images appear before the spectators and the character. But the difference comes in both the multiplication of the protagonist (here, then, there is no exterior figure, just many Cecílias) and the disfigurement that they suffer. Both of these facts highlight the idea of an interior struggle that threatens to break Cecilia apart.

The focus here on the protagonist and the torment that she undergoes at her own hands is underlined in the addition to the original Cecilia of three other Cecílias, each with a distinct negative adjective that sets her apart but also reinforces their common origins: Cecilia *loca*, Cecilia *vieja*, and Cecilia *enferma*. As quoted above, these three figures are surprising and tormenting, forcing the original Cecilia out of her place of suffering for love and into a space of fragmentation and fear:

<sup>13</sup> "*Aparecen en el espejo sus imágenes: todas gemelas de Cecilia pero desfiguradas por su desesperación. Las imágenes la atormentan*" (Espinosa Mendoza 2004: 53).



CECILIA (Espantada.) ¿Quiénes son ustedes?  
 CECILIA LOCA Somos tú misma.  
 CECILIA ENFERMA Somos lo que serás.  
 CECILIA VIEJA Somos lo que ya eres. (*Bailan y ríen cantando sus nombres.*)

(53)

[CECILIA (*Scared*). Who are you? // CRAZY CECILIA We are you. // SICK CECILIA We are what you will be. // OLD CECILIA We are what you already are. (*They dance and laugh singing their names.*)]

The three images of what Cecilia is or will be taunt the original and solidify her identification as fragmented.

The second time Cecilia is multiplied is in the eighth and penultimate scene after Cecilia has learned that Leonardo is about to marry Isabel but before she urges Pimienta to attack her lover. Cecilia, abandoned again by her friends and her lover, is heartbroken that Leonardo would betray her by marrying another woman. This complete desertion of Cecilia again causes the earlier fragmentation:

CECILIA (*Llamándola en vano.*) ¡Nene! ¡Nemesia! (*Entrando a la casa.*)  
 ¡Mamita! ¡Abuela! (*Pausa.*) Nadie, abandonada siempre y para siempre. ¡Dios mío, qué crueldad! Se casa, me traiciona, me humilla. (*Solloza contra el espejo roto.*) ¡Cabrón!

*Aparecen las imágenes de Cecilia, vestidas con gastados trajes de novias, ensangrentados. La rondan y se burlan.*

(63)

[CECILIA (*Calling in vain.*) Nene! Nemesia! (*Going into the house.*) Momma! Grandmother! (*Pause.*) No one, always abandoned forever. My God, how cruel! He's getting married, he's betrayed me, he's humiliating me. (*She sobs against the broken mirror.*) Bastard! *The images of Cecilia appear, dressed in a ruined wedding dress, bloodied. They surround her, laughing at her.*]

Again, in a moment of anguish, Cecilia leans against the broken mirror and is confronted by fragmentations of herself. This time, in a foreshadowing of the bloodletting that will happen at the wedding, the fragmented Cecílias are dressed in a worn, bloodied wedding dress, though they continue to taunt her through their very presence and their verbal interaction. Just as we saw in the initial fragmentation of Cecilia above, this scene echoes the narcissism while it also highlights the social and financial limitations that would have been available to Cecilia in this situation. The bloodied wedding dress underlines her inability to escape her fate. She is defined by her beauty and her inability to leave behind the social definitions that bind her, a reality that mocks her through the presentation of her fragmented self.

The mirror that is central in the fragmentation of Cecilia Valdés that we see in the two scenes analysed above take on extra significance in light of the fourth scene during the conversation where the grandmother, at the urging of don Cándido, tries to convince Cecilia to give up Leonardo, without revealing why. In this exchange the two women remember Cecilia's childhood, a simpler, happier time (43). These memories cause Cecilia to remember the story of Narcisa, told to her as a child and recounted and acted out on the stage with puppets against a white wall. The story that the grandmother, Chepilla, tells is that of a "capricious and foolish girl" ("niña caprichosa y majadera", 44) named Narcisa. This girl is very beautiful and is given little gifts by others but does not listen to her grandmother. One night she follows the sound of music into a dark alley and meets a sinister man who entices her with jewels to follow him. She follows him but he quickly turns into a hideous figure, who turns out to be the devil, and does not allow her to leave him to return to her grandmother. The story, obviously told to Cecilia to make her more suspicious of others and more obedient to her grandmother, is punctuated at parts with the following warning: "Oh, Narcisa, / beautiful girl, / don't go, / don't lose yourself" ("Ay, Narcisa, / niña hermosa, / no te vayas, / no te pierdas", 45). This bedtime story serves the primary purpose of scaring Cecilia into obedience; however, the re-visioning here of the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, who is so enamoured of his own image that it causes his death is indicative of this Cuban re-telling.

The Cuban version presented here re-imagines this story where the main character becomes female and the fatal flaw is disobedience, not excessive self-love. These two changes offer an opportunity to analyse the purpose in returning to this story within this context. First, there is a condemnation in the actions of the female – Narcisa should not be seduced by the sweets and the pearls that are offered to her. Here, the young girl is shown to be on a path to perdition because she wants and accepts these small gifts and does not listen to the warnings from her grandmother. In this way, the young girl's actions are restricted because of her beauty and she is punished because of the actions of others. While some of the original Greek versions of Narcissus present a dismal view of women as jealous, this version from Espinosa Mendoza reveals how the woman is held responsible for the misdeeds of others, thus creating an interrogation of what it means to be a woman of beauty – this is both her salvation and her downfall.

Throughout this study, when faced with crucial episodes in the re-written text, the reader-spectator has been forced to ask whether this scene is a re-visioned one or from the original. Espinosa Mendoza's use of the Narcisa episode does appear in Cirilo Villaverde's original *Cecilia Valdés*, prompt-

ing the next question of how loyal the later version is to the first. While the twentieth-century text does remain rather loyal to the earlier one, there are obvious departures, prompted perhaps by the change in presentation (theatre, not novel) and profundity (about fifty pages versus approximately 600 pages). While these two differences are important, the moment and manner of presentation of the Narcisa episode stand out as more important in this analysis. In the Villaverde novel, Chepilla, the grandmother, tells Cecilia the story, for what seems to be the first time, as a way to warn her about the dangers of disregarding the elder woman's advice and to scare her away from strangers: "Well, girl, this is what happens to the girls that don't take their elders' advice".<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the story is the same in Espinosa Mendoza's re-visioning of the Cecilia Valdés myth ("these things happen / to the one that didn't listen to her grandmother"),<sup>15</sup> however, the moment and manner of introduction is very different. Here, in a play with a prologue and nine scenes, the story of Narcisa comes at the end of the fourth scene, virtually in the middle of the play. Thus, we have already met Cecilia and, in contrast to its use in the novel, the introduction of the Narcisa story does not need to explain who she is but instead offers a more in-depth explanation of Cecilia and of the relationship between her and her grandmother; we now know that Cecilia is headstrong and will do as she wishes. Furthermore, the scene comes at a crucial moment in the play where Chepilla is trying to dissuade Cecilia from associating further with Leonardo given the incestual nature of their relationship. In this way, the story serves as a way to illustrate that Cecilia has always done as she wanted rather than as she is advised, but also that Cecilia is in need of comfort and can find it from her grandmother. We see this particularly in the fact that the story is presented as one that has repeatedly been recounted by the grandmother to Cecilia (44). Here, then, within the very play of *La virgencita de bronce* we see the idea of re-writing and re-visioning from within. So it is not just the figure of Cecilia Valdés that is recycled within the story but also Cecilia does her own re-visioning in order to further her own needs. Here she is in search of comfort while her grandmother is looking for obedience.

This new re-visioning of the story of Narcissus where Narcisa becomes the responsible party through her passivity connects with Hélène Cixous's ideas on women and writing. We see this particularly when Cixous considers the juxtaposition of absence and presence. This discussion takes place around the idea of woman's fate in love where desire is in the realm of the masculine and the suppression or even absence of it is feminine. In this

<sup>14</sup> "Pues esto es, hija, lo que le sucede a las niñas que no hacen caso de los consejos de los mayores" (Villaverde 1992: 88).

<sup>15</sup> "que estas cosas suceden / a quien a su abuela no oyó" (Espinosa Mendoza 2004: 45).

way, woman stays in the dark, according to Cixous: “she is in the shadow. In the shadow he throws on her; the shadow she is” (1975: 67). We see the need to keep woman and her desire in check through the story of Narcisa, who follows the figure which rapidly mutates once it has her in its grasp. This story, as Chepilla herself notes, is meant to be a cautionary tale that inhibits Cecilia’s behaviour, dampening her curiosity and her desire.

This fear of action, of being active, in the words of Cixous, has provoked a self-loathing on the part of women, where they are alienated from their own bodies and desire, what she names an “antinarcissism”: “A narcissism that only loves itself if it makes itself loved for what is lacking” (1975: 68). In this way, Cecilia would need to deny her sexual desire and suppress her emotions, pretending that she feels love (and only love), and wait for Leonardo to pursue her. However, this inhibition of desire and repression of action that Cixous highlights in the ideal female does not happen in the re-visioning of Espinosa Mendoza’s Cecilia Valdés since the amorous relationship between Cecilia and Leonardo is sexually consummated at the end of the sixth scene, a fact that they both actively want: “*It looks like they are going to claw one another, but then suddenly, they jump on top of one another with a big kiss*”<sup>16</sup> (though, it can be argued, that Cecilia initiates this: “Well, come here, I’m going to give you a smack”; “Pues acérquese, que le daré un coscorrón”, 54). In this way, Espinosa Mendoza creates a new model where Cecilia’s desire is as central as Leonardo’s, where she does not have to become absent in order to have a presence in the scene and on the stage. Espinosa Mendoza, then, writes a new space for the woman that allows desire and action. In this way, we return to Cixous in how she identifies in writing the place of the other: “a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds” (1975: 72, emphasis in the original). Through writing, Espinosa Mendoza creates a Cecilia Valdés that exhibits this ability to break free from the system. However, it must be understood that within the context of the Cecilia Valdés story, this opening is brief and virtually nominal. The destruction of Cecilia and her aspirations at the end of all the versions, even Espinosa Mendoza’s play, underline the lack of opportunity and future for women, particularly of colour, in Cuba.

Nevertheless, when considering the role of re-writing national literature for the stage, this juxtaposition of absence and presence together with the role of writing in opening a new space that exists outside the cur-

<sup>16</sup> “*Parece que se van a arañar pero, de pronto, se lanzan uno sobre el otro uniéndose en un gran beso*” (Espinosa Mendoza 2004: 54).

rent system of repression is particularly important given the context of re-visioning. First, the contradiction between absence and presence is central in re-writing in that the authors choose which texts to re-produce and which not, which episodes within the texts are highlighted versus which are not. Thus, though Cecilia is not able to break through completely, her repeated re-visioning from new and innovative spaces hints at a future possibility for her and definitions of Cuban womanhood. Further, as we see with the example of Cecilia Valdés, the authors of these texts can manage to write outside the system, creating a space where the characters can contest the current system of repression. It is this second point that underlines theatre's ability to question and push boundaries.

Despite the lack of repression in the female desire in *La virgencita de bronce* and the apparent openness that Norge Espinosa Mendoza represents in his play, there is no complete escaping the traditional story of Cecilia, where she becomes the victim of her own violence. Furthermore, embodied in the figure of in-betweenness, we see that Espinosa Mendoza presents an alternate view of what it means to be a Cuban woman. On one hand, the play offers a widening definition of what is Cuban womanhood and how it is defined, while on the other, Espinosa Mendoza interrogates these traditional definitions to question their centrality and their importance within national definitions. The reader-spectator of *La virgencita de bronce* sees that despite the advances that the play suggests, there is no way to completely break the system in which we exist and the struggle must continue.

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