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Roberto Ignacio Diaz

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Paratextual Snow; or, The Threshold of Mercedes Merlin

By ROBERTO IGNACIO DÍAZ

SOME YEARS AGO I accepted a teaching job at a small college in central Maine.¹ Having spent most of my life near the ocean, I decided to look for a place to live on the coast, perhaps in one of those New England towns with white churches and a village green and wondrous legends of brave sea captains. I discovered my town on the bluest morning in spring. Yarmouth had old trees and houses, a beautiful river and a placid marina, plus a very fine bookstore with an outstanding nautical collection. I bought myself a copy of *Moby Dick*, with handsome illustrations by Rockwell Kent, and rented part of a house built in the 1850s, midway between the Royal River and the sleepy spires of North Yarmouth Academy, a preparatory school. I treasured Yarmouth for the stone and grass of its ancient churchyards and the memory of its shipbuilding days. Touring the region, I was particularly taken with the lighthouse at Pemaquid Point, where, not far from the pines and crashing waves, there is a rock on which one can read these commemorative words: "Near this site on August 15, 1635, Ralph Blaisdell and family were shipwrecked. The ship was the *Angel Gabriel*, bound from Bristol, England, to Pemaquid. From here the family went to York, Maine, and later to Salisbury, Massachusetts." A second plaque honors the family of one John Cogswell, who also arrived here on the *Angel Gabriel*. As my life progressed in this civil corner of America, a landscape inscribed with the memories of its first European dwellers, I fancied myself a discoverer or an explorer, and congratulated myself on this northern exposure of mine. I was happy to be the first native of Cuba to live in this town, on this remote shore.

But what's wrong with this picture? My brief, idyllic representation of Yarmouth and its surroundings is no doubt flawed. It is reductive, like those portraits of the Arabs and Islam put forth by British and French travellers in the 19th century, which are the subject of *Orientalism* by Edward Said, who states: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memoirs and landscapes, remarkable

1. Parts of this article were originally presented in my paper, "Paratextos, o los umbrales de Mercedes Merlin," read at the conference on the "Imaginario Cultural Cubano," University of California, Irvine, November 12, 1994. I would like to thank Marilyn Hinkley of the Yarmouth Historical Society (Yarmouth, Maine), and Joyce St. Pierre of the Fishermen's Museum (Pemaquid Point, Maine), for their generous assistance in researching this article.

experiences" (1). Similarly, I refashioned Yarmouth to correspond to my quaint image of New England and not to its modern suburban realities. Like Edward Lane in Cairo or René de Chateaubriand in Jerusalem, I fixed my gaze on what to me were the place's "oddities" and disregarded the complexities of a town which is very much a part of late-20th-century America. The police blotter in the local newspaper may have abounded in stories of deer eating a villager's flowers and other such peccadilloes, but there were also real crimes and misdemeanors in Yarmouth. I chose not to see them. Unlike Said's European Orientalists, who often depict other cultures in various shades of dark suggesting barbarism, I focused on Yarmouth's abstract perfection. After all, I came from a violent southern land that beheld the United States, as well as Europe, as the privileged spaces of order and well-being. In Gabriel García Márquez's "La viuda de Montiel" ["Montiel's Widow"], for instance, two Latin American sisters living in Paris write to their mother back home: "Esto es la civilización. . . . Allá, en cambio, no es un buen medio para nosotras. Es imposible vivir en un país tan salvaje donde asesinan a la gente por cuestiones políticas" (108) ["This is civilization. . . . There, on the other hand, it's not a good atmosphere for us. It's imposible to live in a country so savage that people are killed for political reasons" (153)]. Ignoring that some things were certainly rotten in the state of Maine, my northern proclivities—Occidentalism, if you will—metamorphosed Yarmouth into the proverbial land of the free, the best of this brave new world of ours.

If I was slanted in my brief depiction of the town in the early 1990s, I was plainly mistaken when it came to imagining its historical past. Yarmouth, so snug, so aloof, turned out to have a Cuban connection. Like Sir Richard Burton in the Arabian cities forbidden to non-Muslims, I had wanted my experience in Yarmouth to be unique: I desired to be the only person from my country who had ever wandered into this remarkable land. However, a few months after my arrival, the director of the Yarmouth Historical Society revealed to me a piece of the town's past that I could not have suspected. In the mid-19th century, one George Woods, formerly a teacher at North Yarmouth Academy, had founded the Yarmouth Institute, and this long-vanished school had counted among its boarders numerous students from Cuba. In *Ancient North Yarmouth and Yarmouth, Maine: 1636-1936*, historian William Hutchinson Rowe provides what to me was astonishing information: "During the last years of the life of the institute twenty or thirty young Cubans were placed under Doctor Woods's charge who are remembered by the townspeople with great interest as among them were some whose names became prominent in the long struggle for the independence of Cuba" (316). In my eyes, the town's red-brick school buildings, so austere, so remote, had to be reimagined into a homespun space where boys from Cuba's distant provinces, as they traversed time and time again the

snowbound fields of Yarmouth, must have spoken Spanish together and dreamed alone, in who knows what language, of their faraway country. These school-children—boys with Anglicized names, such as Gustavus Bonneval of Cienfuegos and Alexander Varela of Havana, as old school records at the Yarmouth Historical Society show—were witnesses to certain invisible ties that bound Cuba and Maine together.

More surprising still, among the students were, according to Rowe (316), Máximo Gómez and Calixto García, two of the greatest leaders in Cuba's War of Independence, better known as the Spanish-American War. If all of America remembered the *Maine*, the battleship sunk in Havana harbor, Yarmouth's Cuban alumni, back in their war-torn homeland, must have remembered Maine. And some in these United States did remember the Cuban students as well. A report about Gómez in a local newspaper from the 1890s contains the recollections of Dr. Woods himself, who had been Gómez's teacher:

The lumber trade between Maine and Cuba was responsible for the appearance at an American school of Gomez [sic]. The lumber dealers of the coast of Maine had many boats which made trips frequently to Cuba and on several of these voyages the Americans would pick up the brighter young Cubans and bring them home with them. Gomez among the others was brought home in that manner and the moment he got there it was seen he had the making of an intelligent man and he was sent to Yarmouth institute. Here he soon became endeared to the teachers, including myself, and was popular with the rest of the students. The Cubans who attended school along with Gomez were all royal good fellows, and took to their work with a will, showing a sort of bull dog tenacity which seems to be characteristic of the better class of the members of the race. I am glad to see that one of my former pupils has attained to such notoriety and prominence as has Gomez. ("Maximo [sic] Gomez Was a Student in Yarmouth About Thirty Years Ago" 11)

Implicit in Woods's statement is the notion that Cuban children—at least the better specimens among them—could shed some of their foreign barbarism through the civilizing effects of an American education.² Woods also foreshadows a conventional vision of Cubans in the United States that has flourished with vigor since the Cuban Revolution and its ensuing waves of exiles: Cubans, unlike other Hispanics, are generally perceived to be hard-working individuals who can make their hosts feel proud of their own generosity.³ But despite his nationalistic and class prejudices, despite his self-absorbed usage of "home," Woods's memory is valuable because it recaptures both a certain Cuban and New England past that would otherwise have probably vanished. After all, Cuban children in a small 19th-century town in Maine hardly constitute a tableau engraved in our collective memory. Verifying and imagining the existence of

2. For an extensive discussion of the rhetoric of European and American colonialism, see Spurr. In a subdued manner, Woods's discourse exhibits certain traits of what Spurr calls the tactic of "affirmation": "This rhetoric is deployed on behalf of a collective subjectivity which idealizes itself variously in the name of civilization, humanity, science, progress, etc., so that the repeated affirmation of such values becomes in itself a means of gaining power and mastery" (110).

3. Stavans discusses the negative preconceptions that also exist: "As a rule, the U.S. media portray Cubans and Cuban-Americans in stereotypes, as power-driven or as individuals obsessed with memory and exile" (55).

this dead children's society granted me, an outsider, certain proprietary rights over this land. There were Cuban ghosts in the streets of Yarmouth, and their shadows gave my little community a Hispanic past and legacy.

For all its strangeness, the lot of these 19th-century Cuban children—displacement, linguistic exile, homesickness—is not uncommon. In fact, the colonial history of Cuba cannot be imagined or written without the stories of many people, including children, who for various reasons left their native soil for another country.⁴ In the 19th century, many Cuban authors were exiles, including José María Heredia, perhaps Spanish America's foremost Romantic poet, and Cirilo Villaverde, author of *Cecilia Valdés*, one of Cuba's canonical novels. The truly exemplary case is that of José Martí, the author and national leader who in many ways represents for Cuba what Washington and Lincoln, Emerson and Whitman do for the United States. Though he ultimately died on a Cuban field fighting for his country's independence, Martí spent most of his life abroad, defending the cause of Cuba's liberty and penning a masterful body of poetry, essays and orations that scholars now uphold as the touchstone of Cuban literature. In some ways, Martí's biography may be regarded as that of a proto-Cuban-American. In New York, where he lived for most of the 1880s and 1890s, he was a successful man, writing in English for *The Sun* and *The Hour*. But unlike the eclipsed memory of Yarmouth's Cuban schoolboys, Martí's presence in the United States is still altogether real and palpable. He is in fact a veritable icon; his gaunt visage is everywhere in Miami and other cities with sizable Cuban communities. In New York, at Central Park near the Avenue of the Americas, there is a statue of the hero on horseback at the battle of Dos Ríos, where he died an epic death. And yet, despite the celebrated linkage between writing and exile in Cuban literature, other authors besides Heredia, Villaverde and Martí, precisely because of reasons originating in their absence from their homeland, have remained only as shadowy figures in the pantheon of Cuba's national glories.

If Martí and company are prominently, even piously, situated at the core of Cuban letters, there is one 19th-century writer whose presence in the country's literary history is almost insubstantial. Born in Havana, María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo (1789-1852), alias the comtesse Merlin, alias the condesa de Merlín, alias Mercedes Merlin, is the author of *La Havane* [*Havana*] (1844), also known as *Viaje a la Habana* [*Journey to Havana*] (1844), also known as *La Habana* [*Havana*] (1981). What's in all these names, one may ask. In *Seuils*, Gérard Genette advances the concept of paratext, a term which includes such visible—and at times virtually invisible—constituents as an author's name or a

4. The same is also true for the Republic of Cuba, which, from its establishment in 1902 to the present, has also been marked by the experience of exile—men and women who have transformed their new communities even after their deaths. As Pérez Firmat remarks in *Next Year in Cuba*, "Miami is a little Havana not only because of the Cubans who still live there but because, perhaps primarily because, of those who have died there" (152).

book's title, cover, dedication, epigraphs, prologue and illustrations, as well as such external elements as letters, diaries, even interviews. According to Genette, a text never appears in isolation. Rather, it is always accompanied by those paratexts that frame it; they are the work's *seuils*, as it were, its threshold. As we shall see, the history of Merlin's *La Havane* illustrates how those seemingly minor elements play an important role in determining the way in which a text is read and evaluated within, or outside of, a given literary system. Informed by nationalistic assumptions that define Cuban culture narrowly, the paratexts also underscore Merlin's rarity as a literary figure, for she is an author who shunned Spanish, the official language of Cuba, and wrote instead in French.

Of all 19th-century Cuban-born writers, Merlin is perhaps the one whose ties with the nation's literature have been most actively questioned and challenged. There is a certain measure of unfairness in this negation. For instance, given Cuba's history of expatriate artists, Merlin's biography is really not that exceptional.⁵ Married to one of Napoleon's generals, she lived in France for most of her life, returning to Cuba on one occasion, a sentimental journey that resulted in her magnificent travel narrative, *La Havane*. Moreover, she is not the only Cuban writer who can be classified within two literary traditions. If she arguably belongs both to Cuban literature and a foreign one, so does Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who was born on the island and resided mostly in Spain, but whose work, unlike that of Merlin, has been granted a central position in Cuban literary historiography.⁶ Avellaneda is clearly part of Spanish literature also, but some of her poems, like "Al partir" ["Upon Leaving Cuba"] and "La vuelta a la patria" ["Return to the Fatherland"], live deeply in the imagination of many Cuban readers. It is true that Merlin wrote exclusively in French, but so did José-María de Heredia (José María Heredia's cousin), the Parnassian author of *Les Trophées* born near Santiago de Cuba. While the French Heredia, whose interest in Cuba is peripheral, is simply absent from the established discussion on Cuban literature, Merlin's writing is often openly distrusted and rejected. The poet Gastón Baquero, for instance, referring to Merlin, acerbically claims, "una cubana escritora no es siempre una escritora cubana" ["a Cuban who writes is not always a Cuban writer"] (8), while Guillermo Cabrera Infante, despite his own flirtation with English literature, dismisses her in *Holy Smoke* as "a Parisian from head to toe" (155). An act of erasure surrounds Merlin's authorship, and her books seem consigned to laughter and forgetting.⁷

5. Merlin's biography is discussed in Figarola-Caneda (*passim*) and Bueno (11-21, 49-55).

6. As Méndez Rodenas demonstrates in "Voyage to *La Havane*," the fact that both Avellaneda and Merlin are women writers has contributed largely to their negative reception in Cuban literature. Avellaneda, like Merlin, has also been regarded as a foreigner, but, unlike the author of *La Havane*, she is now widely accepted as a Cuban writer by literary critics and historians.

7. There are, of course, exceptions, even among 19th-century reviewers of Merlin. See, for instance, Merlin's entry (under "Santa-Cruz") in Francisco Calcagno's 1878 *Diccionario biográfico cubano*: "Porque las bellas producciones de su inteligencia brotarán [sic] á orillas del nebuloso Sena, donde ha pasado toda su vida literaria: porque en lengua extranjera emitiera sus pensamientos y modularán [sic] sus hijos sus primeras palabras, no dejó

What is the role of such literary ghosts in a culture? Merlin is indeed an elusive figure. Like Yarmouth's Cuban schoolboys, she was removed from her native land at an early age and taken to a cold climate. Unlike them, however, she wrote about her life abroad. In her *Souvenirs et mémoires* (1836), she describes her first experience of winter in Castile:

Pendant la nuit, la neige tomba à gros flocons. Je ne saurais dépeindre l'impression de tristesse que j'éprouvais, lorsqu'en ouvrant mes volets, le matin, je jetai un coup d'œil sur la campagne. Le spectacle qui s'offrait à mes yeux contrista mon âme, et y répandit une sorte de terreur. Plus de feuilles, plus de fruits; le gazon même avait disparu. Des troncs et des branches noirs, épars ça et là, comme les débris d'un naufrage, offraient une image complète de destruction, et la nature me parut ensevelie sous un vaste linceul. (86)

[Snow fell heavily overnight. I cannot describe my feeling of sadness in the morning when, opening my shutters, I looked at the countryside. The sight offered to my view saddened my soul and filled it with a kind of terror. Leaves and fruits were gone; even the grass had vanished. Black trunks and branches, scattered here and there like debris from a shipwreck, afforded a complete image of destruction, and nature seemed to me buried beneath a vast shroud.]

Surrounded by this bleak landscape, the little girl's refuge is to imagine the physical splendor of her native country, "ces forêts vierges plantées d'arbres de toute couleur . . . le chant d'une multitude d'oiseaux; la douceur de l'air, la beauté du ciel, les rayons brillants du soleil" ["those virgin forests where trees of all colors grew . . . the song of a multitude of birds; the air's softness; the radiant sunshine"] (*Souvenirs et mémoires* 86). If winter is terrifying only the first time, Merlin, even after several decades, will continue to regard it as a foreign sight, as much a literal experience as a literary marvel: "le spectacle de la nature, en hiver, m'attache maintenant par une sensation mélancolique qui ne manque pas d'une certaine douceur. Néanmoins mes premières idées sur l'hiver ayant été puisées dans les romans, j'en suis toujours frappée d'une manière neuve et piquante" ["the sight of nature, in winter, strikes me now as a melancholy feeling not devoid of a certain softness; but since my first ideas of winter came from novels, it still strikes me every time in a new and biting way"] (*Souvenirs et mémoires* 86). Nevertheless, while she never stops describing herself as a Cuban, one can also read in Merlin a Frenchwoman's perspective. In *La Havane*, plural pronouns and possessive adjectives tell the story of her divided affinities; "nous" ("we") can mean "we the French" but also "we the Cubans." Interestingly, the nature of the tropics, so nostalgically invoked in Spain, can strike her upon returning to her native country as exuberantly savage. For all

de ser cubana, y una de nuestras principales glorias literarias, máxime cuando sus escritos són para Cuba, y cuando á semejanza de la Avellaneda y Heredia, sólo tomaba la pluma para derramar, en los recuerdos de la patria todas las efusiones del más puro patriotismo" ["Just because the exquisite creations of her intelligence were born on the nebulous banks of the Seine, just because she expressed her thoughts, and her children spoke their first words, in a foreign language, she did not stop being a Cuban, or one of our greatest literary glories, especially when her writings are for Cuba, and when, like Avellaneda and Heredia, she took the pen only to exude, in her memories of the fatherland, the purest patriotism"] (579).

her love of Cuba, Havana's cathedral, a baroque edifice celebrated by later writers, seems to her frightfully reminiscent of the island's lush nature: "des fruits entrelacés par des lianes et des guirlandes de fleurs, puis des imitations des feuilles de papayer larges et lustrées" ["fruits intertwined by creepers and flower garlands, and imitation papaya leaves, large and shiny"] (*La Havane* 2: 200).⁸ Writing from Havana to her French son-in-law, she recalls the soft autumnal landscape of the Loire Valley as the true site of civilization:

Vous souvenez-vous, mon cher Gentien, de ces belles soirées d'automne passées si doucement au château de Dissay, lorsque le soleil, d'un rouge enflammé mais sans chaleur, projetait ses rayons sur la pointe de vos peupliers, et que, ses derniers lueurs pâlisant par degré, allaient s'égarer entre les découpures et les bas-reliefs de vos tourelles? . . . Mon souvenir me ramène aussi vers ces prairies artificielles que j'aimais tant à contempler. . . . C'est, mon ami, que vous êtes dans un pays civilisé, plus façonné que vrai. (*La Havane* 2:381-83)

[Do you remember, my dear Gentien, those beautiful autumn evenings so sweetly spent at the chateau of Dissay, when the sun, burning red but not hot, shone on the top of your poplars, and when its last glimmers, gradually vanishing, wandered along the indentations and bas-reliefs of your turrets? . . . My memory also takes me back to those artificial meadows which I so loved to behold. . . . What happens, my friend, is that you live in a civilized country, more molded than real.]

The specter of Merlin's Europeanness—after all, she echoes *avant la lettre* the sisters in García Márquez's story—has controlled the reception of her works among Cuban readers. She often regards the world, as Baquero and Cabrera Infante would have it, through Parisian eyes, unwittingly branding herself as a foreigner in Cuba. But, read within the context of Spanish American literature, Merlin's nostalgia for France is hardly unique. It foreshadows, for one, Rubén Darío's fin-de-siècle *modernismo*, which sprung in part from the Nicaraguan poet's reading of French verse, and which metrically and thematically, especially in its early phase, pays constant homage to France's cultural (and material) wealth. Far from the poet's tropical birthplace, the speaker in one of Darío's sonnets, "De invierno" ["On Winter"], surveys the snug interior of a French household: a fireplace; a white angora cat; porcelain and silk objects from the Orient; a young woman wrapped in a sable coat. All's well with the world as he beholds this scene, "y en tanto cae la nieve del cielo de París" ["and meanwhile snow is falling from the sky over Paris"] (464). Merlin recalls France as a real place, but also, like Darío, as a literary antithesis to her Spanish American homeland. The country is "plus façonné que vrai" ["more molded than real"] not only because she sees it as the exclusive realm of civilization, with its well-tempered sun and geometrical gardens, but also because the idea of France itself, in her eyes, is ultimately perceived as crafted and alien, like the experience of winter. Hence Merlin's vision of snow, still grounded in literature after

8. For Merlin's ambiguous usage of "nous" and her typecast view of Cuban nature, see Díaz ("Merlin's Foreign House" 63-66).

a lifetime in Europe, recalls that of Julián del Casal, one of Cuba's preeminent *modernistas*. Born in Havana, where he died at age 29, Casal never left Cuba except for a trip to Spain, yet he wrote a book of poetry outlandishly titled *Nieve* [*Snow*] (1892). His "Nostalgias," included in this collection, contains the melancholy dream of a northern land that fits well with Merlin's own recollection of Europe:

Suspiro por las regiones
donde vuelan los alciones
sobre el mar,
y el soplo helado del viento
parece en su movimiento
sollozar;
donde la nieve que baja
del firmamento amortaja
el verdor
de los campos olorosos
y de ríos caudalosos
el rumor;
donde ostenta siempre el cielo,
a través de aéreo velo,
color gris;
es más hermosa la Luna
y cada estrella más que una
flor de lis. (135)

[I yearn for those regions where halcyons fly over the sea, and the icy wind seems to moan as it blows; where snow falling from heaven shrouds the greenness of the fragrant countryside and the sound of roaring rivers; where the sky, through an airy veil, always boasts its grayness; and where the Moon is more beautiful, and each star is more beautiful than a fleur-de-lis.]

Nothing could be farther from sun-drenched Cuba than Casal's snow-covered landscape. But then again, if Casal's halcyon dreams and celestial fleur-de-lis, with its *ancien régime* resonances, are emblematic of the speaker's desire to escape Cuban reality—like the poem's subsequent Orientalist fantasy—Merlin's French chateau may be, for some, actual proof of her defection, a dangerous, if involuntary, desire for literary-historical banishment.

Indeed, from the mid-19th century onwards, historians and critics of Cuban literature, speaking from a nationalistic position, have stressed the seemingly extraterritorial nature of *La Havane* and Merlin's other works. Not until recently has she been the subject of critical studies in which her books are considered within the corpus of Cuban and Spanish American literatures. Sylvia Molloy has examined Merlin's depiction of childhood in her first work, *Mes douze premières années* (1831), in the context of autobiographical writing in Spanish America. From the viewpoint of feminist criticism, Adriana Méndez Rodenas has analyzed Merlin's unacknowledged role in the formation of Cuba's national identity; for her, the ejection of Merlin from the literary canon is part and parcel

of Cuba's male-centered critical discourse. I have elsewhere attributed Merlin's invisibility mainly to reasons of language and genre. First and foremost, *La Havane* (the text on which I focus) is written in a language alien to most Cubans, and the consequences of this sign of foreignness cannot be overestimated. Notwithstanding the elite's traditional knowledge of French and the significant pockets of native speakers of the language in such cities as Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo, Spanish has traditionally been viewed as the sole vehicle of Cuban literature. Cuban-born authors writing in French, such as Merlin herself, José-Maria de Heredia, Augusto de Armas, Armand Godoy, and Eduardo Manet, certainly violate the country's linguistic conventions, and an unusual effort must be made in order to read their literary output within the Cuban literary system. Second, *La Havane* easily falls off the map of Cuban letters because of its ambiguous generic filiations. The text's affinity to three types of discourse—travel narratives, memoir, and the *cuadros de costumbres* [sketches of manners] of Cuba's incipient national literature—is a rare phenomenon that further complicates classification.⁹

The present essay, however, considers Merlin's paratexts as one further reason, intrinsically linked to the above, for the exclusion of Merlin's *La Havane* from the critical discussion of Cuban literature. Paratexts may often be regarded as negligible, but, in Merlin's case, they contribute to the deletion of both author and text from the imagination of those who seek to circumscribe Cuba's body of literature. In this metaphorical outpost a reader often decides whether or not to enter into the contiguous space, the text itself.¹⁰ Significantly, Merlin's various paratexts are almost never controlled by the author or her "allies" (as Genette calls them), those persons and entities toiling for the best reception of the text. Adversely, Merlin's paratexts undergo a certain transformation in the hands of others which ambiguously underscores the text's seemingly foreign nature and undermines its ties with Cuban literature. Critics and publishers, as

9. The rare coexistence in *La Havane* of a travel narrative and a book of memoirs is clearly seen in the following passage, which I discuss in "Merlin's Foreign House" (71-73). From the ship on which she returns to Cuba, Merlin beholds Havana, but her gaze uncannily reaches certain places, such as a child's bedroom (her own bedroom?), which for conventional travel writers—travellers in space, not time—remain hidden: "Portes et fenêtres sont ouvertes; tout est à jour, l'œil pénètre jusqu'aux intimités de la vie domestique, depuis la cour arrosée et couverte de fleurs jusqu'au lit de la *niña*, dont les rideaux de linon sont garnis de noeuds roses" ["Doors and windows are open; everything is exposed, and the eye reaches the intimacy of domestic life, from the courtyard, watered and covered with flowers, to the *niña's* bed, whose linen drapes are decorated with pink flowers"] (*La Havane* 1:286; Merlin's emphasis). For a discussion of the major role that European travel narratives have played in Latin American culture, see González Echevarría.

10. Genette explains: "Cette frange, en effet, toujours porteuse d'un commentaire auctorial, ou plus ou moins légitimé par l'auteur, constitue, entre texte et hors-texte, une zone non seulement de transition, mais de *transaction*: lieu privilégié d'une pragmatique et d'une stratégie, d'une action sur le public au service, bien ou mal compris et accompli, d'un meilleur accueil du texte et d'une lecture plus pertinente—plus pertinente, s'entend, aux yeux de l'auteur et de ses alliés" ["Indeed, this fringe, which always carries an authorial commentary, or a commentary more or less legitimized by the author, constitutes, between the text and that which lies outside of it, a space not only of transition, but of *transaction*: a privileged space of pragmatism and strategy, designed to act on the audience in the service, whether or not it is well conceived and carried out, of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading—pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his or her allies"] (8; Genette's emphasis).

well as other readers, habitually betray and multiply certain paratexts so that the work's unity and relevance in the system of Cuban literature are compromised. Hidden by a snowfall of uncongenial signifiers, the paratextual spaces constituting Merlin's threshold threaten to be almost impenetrable, and the text itself becomes, in turn, a forbidding, even forbidden, region.

It is quite possible that no other Cuban-born author is known by as many names as Merlin. On the cover of her books as well as in critical and literary-historical works, "María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo" is also known as "Mercedes Santa Cruz, Condesa de Merlín"; or "la condesa de Merlín, Dña. Mercedes Santa Cruz"; or "la Condesa de Merlín"; or "la Condesa Merlin"; or "la Comtesse Merlin"; or "Madame la Comtesse Merlin"; or "la Comtesse de Merlin"; or, as she signed her letters, "Mercedes Merlin" *tout court*. Granted, Merlin is not the only Cuban writer who finds herself in this predicament. The last name of Alejo Carpentier is not always pronounced the same; the final "r" is sometimes deleted, observing the author's French origin, and at times it becomes uvular, which is incorrect French. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who writes in English as well as Spanish, acquires a certain British air when known as G. Cabrera Infante. But Merlin's case is different, mainly because she writes in French and must depend on translations by others to reach her Cuban audience. The ways in which her identity is variously multiplied leads not only to fragmentation, but also to certain slanted readings of her works; Merlin's plurality of names is partially a consequence of her biography. María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo becomes the comtesse Merlin upon marrying Charles Merlin. But, in Cuba, her name becomes Spanish by artificially gaining an acute accent. The divergence between "Merlin" and "Merlín" is slight but nonetheless significant. The Hispanized version thrusts the reader into an outlandish realm, the *matière de Bretagne*, which is unreal, alien, even comical. The French version also alludes to the magician of Arthurian legends, but among Cuban readers the original absence of the accent, were it preserved, would somehow disguise that connection; "Merlin" (a Spanish-speaking reader would likely stress the first syllable) lacks the ludicrous connotations of "Merlín." Moreover, the nobiliary title, often avoided by Merlin herself, detaches the author from Cuba's presumably democratic culture; appellations such as "doña" and "madame" also contribute to her perceived aloofness. It comes as no surprise, then, that contemporary Cuban authors have variously played with the humorous possibilities of Merlin's name; she becomes the "Condesa de Marlín" in Cabrera Infante's "Meta-Final" (144) and the "Condesa de Berlín" in Severo Sarduy's *De donde son los cantantes* (76).

The issue of Merlin's names becomes more complex when specific meanings are ascribed to her shifting nomenclature. If the author's many names are

originally a consequence of her biography, they are also codified by the critics, which is what occurs in Méndez Rodenas's groundbreaking studies:

Throughout this essay, I shall use the name Santa Cruz y Montalvo to signify the criolla identity of the writer, that is, when considering her within the Cuban literary tradition, or in reading the early works that recount her childhood in the island. In other contexts, I shall refer to the author as La Condesa de Merlín, her literary name, with the following variants: la Merlín, when comparing her to la Avellaneda, the usual critical abbreviation for women writers of the period; la Condesa, when abbreviating her nom de plume; and la comtesse Merlin, when emphasizing her French identity. ("Voyage to *La Havane*" 95n17)

Indeed, writers situated on the boundaries between two languages, cultures or literary traditions often possess more than one name. The slight variations in Carpentier's and Cabrera Infante's names are a good case in point; at different stages in their careers, both authors have been enticed by French and English literatures respectively. Outside of Cuba, cases of onomastic doubleness include the Anglo-Argentinean writer Guillermo Enrique, or W.H., Hudson; the Spanish-English poet José María, or Joseph, Blanco White; and one T.R. Ybarra, author of *Young Man of Caracas* (1941). Elmer Davis, who writes the foreword to Ybarra's book, comments on his Venezuelan-American friend's life on the hyphen: "His North American friends were of course aware that he was half Caraqueño and half Plymouthriqueño, that the person known around New York as Thomas Russell Ybarra was known in other localities as Don Tomás Ybarra Russell, with heaven knows how many saints' names interpolated besides" (vii).

While some of these alterations may seem trivial, Merlin's plethora of names is problematic. For one, it has been read as a sign of fragmentation in Merlin's authorship. By multiplying the paratext, a certain interpretation of her work is advanced which stresses the author's supposedly divided self. Méndez Rodenas masterfully identifies the various threads in Merlin's texture, but the act of marking each of them with an individual name undermines the work's cohesiveness. Oblivious to the effect provoked by her own critical gesture, Méndez Rodenas interprets this profusion of names (which she reduces to two in a later article) as evidence—and not the source—of a perceived fissure in the author:

Countess Merlin has two names, and two concealed identities beneath the sign of self. . . . It is as if Merlin mused to herself as she wrote the entries of her travel diary: "Who am I, now that I am here in the still night of the tropics? Countess or Creole? Santa Cruz y Montalvo, or 'la Condesa Merlín'? Which of these masks hides my authentic self?" ("A Journey to the (Literary) Source" 708-09)

These hypothetical questions, though absolutely pertinent, are never posited in the text of *La Havane*, as Méndez Rodenas's "as if" makes clear. But this dramatization introduces a tone that distorts the work's moderation. If Merlin's writing seems at times cleaved, her authorial integrity is split further by this critical act. In fact, Merlin manages peacefully, if at times clumsily, to interweave and reconcile textually the various pairs of opposites marking her bio-

graphical and literary journeys: Cuba and France; the Spanish and French languages; the exoticist discourse of European travel narratives and the self-portraits of Cuban *cuadros de costumbres*. There are indeed observable fault lines in her writing, and they are particularly visible when she tries to imitate in French the various dialects of Cuban Spanish. But her identity, though malleable, shows few cracks. She remains unaffected, for instance, by the changing values of “nous” to which I alluded earlier. Her nostalgia for France cannot be detached from a similar feeling for Cuba: the two sentiments acquire their true meaning when they are calmly interwoven in one writer. Significantly, she habitually signed her letters “Mercedes Merlin,” gently coupling the name received at birth in Cuba with the title acquired years later in Europe, as if to suggest the possible richness of twin loyalties. Because it encompasses without much ado her experience in two different worlds, perhaps “Mercedes Merlin” most clearly articulates the tone and spirit of *La Havane*, a text which, for the most part, exemplifies what Gustavo Pérez Firmat, reporting on the modern context of Cuban America, calls “the non-conflictive cohabitation of dissimilar cultures” (“Transcending Exile” 5). There is not a more lavish intersection of cultures in Merlin’s text than in any of Carpentier’s novels nor, for that matter, in the works of Jorge Luis Borges. Some critics and readers may have questioned Borges’s ties to Argentina and the Hispanic tradition, and there have been numerous quips about his being “Georgie” or “Borgès”; in the end, however, he remains indivisible as “Borges.” Why should Merlin be treated differently?

The instability in Merlin’s name is paralleled in the two titles attached to her main work. Published originally in Paris and Brussels as *La Havane*, the text was immediately, if only partially, translated into Spanish as *Viaje a la Habana*, with a preface by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. This abridged version, though highly poetical, evades the polemics and textual oddity of the French original. *Viaje a la Habana* has been published in Cuba several times, most recently in 1974. The first complete translation of *La Havane*, however, came out only in 1981, outside of Cuba. Significantly, *La Habana* preserves not only the complexity of Merlin’s work, but it also mirrors faithfully the original title. The difference between the titles *Viaje a la Habana* and *La Habana* is crucial for understanding the reception of Merlin’s work in Cuba. If *La Havane* and *La Habana* describe the author’s relation with her subject in neutral terms, the title *Viaje a la Habana* transforms Cuba into a distant, alien space for Merlin, while she herself, in turn, is marked as a traveller, a foreign voice in the place she depicts. If a paratext seeks to achieve a better reception for any given work according to the criteria of author and allies, then *Viaje a la Habana* fails in its goal, for it simply serves to foreground the author’s alterity in regard to Cuba. The book’s immediate reception in Havana confirms this view. In his *Refutación*

del folleto intitulado Viaje a la Habana por la condesa Merlín, Félix Tanco says: “La señora de Merlín, por decirlo de una vez, ha visto a la isla de Cuba con ojos parisienses y no ha querido comprender que la Habana no es París” [“It must be said once and for all: Madame Merlin has regarded the island of Cuba through Parisian eyes, and has refused to see that Havana is not Paris”] (as quoted by Bueno 43). But *La Habana* seems to indicate a shift in the perception of Merlin’s work among Cuban readers. Interestingly, Amalia Bacardí’s translation of *La Havane* was undertaken and published outside of Cuba; exile, after all, is the space of nostalgia and linguistic alteration, two experiences shared by Merlin. By restoring the work’s original title, *La Habana* retrieves Merlin from the condition of traveller and grants the text, as it were, a certificate of citizenship.

Merlin’s reception in Cuban literary history has also been affected by another paratext in *Viaje a la Habana*. In her preface, entitled “Apuntes biográficos de la Condesa de Merlín” [“Biographical Notes on the Comtesse Merlin”], Avellaneda expresses her admiration for her compatriot’s works. But despite the clear affinity between both writers, Avellaneda, speaking of Merlin’s works, regrets how “las vemos con disgusto destinadas a enriquecer la literatura francesa” [“we have no pleasure in seeing them destined to enrich French literature”] (7). In the mid-19th century, when cultural discourse stressed the correspondence between language and nation, Avellaneda’s unequivocal judgment is hardly surprising. More difficult to explain is the way in which her words have often been echoed by later generations to justify Merlin’s ostracism from Cuban literature. Thus, in *La prosa en Cuba*, José Manuel Carbonell y Rivero denies Merlin, on linguistic grounds, the role of founder of Cuban narrative fiction: “De haber escrito la Condesa de Merlín en castellano su *Histoire de la soeur* [sic] *Inés*, que vio luz en 1832, sería ésta la novela cubana más antigua” [“Had the Countess of Merlín written it in Spanish, her *Histoire de la sœur Inés* would be the first Cuban novel”] (11:3).

If many elements lie outside of Merlin’s control, the book’s dedication is one paratext that she formulates on her own. Ironically, her opening remarks have also detracted from an amicable reception of her work. Although she addresses *La Havane* “À mes compatriotes” [“To my compatriots”] (1:vii), introducing herself as a Cuban, her words to Captain-General Leopoldo O’Donnell inevitably link her to Spain’s brutal colonial regime: “Permettez, général, que je place sous votre égide protectrice cette œuvre conçue par le sentiment patriotique d’une femme; le désir ardent de voir mon pays heureux me l’a seul inspirée” [“Allow me, general, to place under your protection this work conceived by a woman’s patriotic sentiment; only a fervent wish for my country’s happiness has inspired it”] (1:v). Despite her best intentions, Merlin’s political *faux pas* still adversely affects the reading of *La Havane*.

Other paratexts, both on the island and abroad, further hamper Merlin's reception as a Cuban author. This is the case with such material components as the book's covers and spine. The back cover, for instance, is usually reserved for the author's biographical information and various blurbs inviting the reader to judge the book favorably. However, on the back cover of the latest edition of the abridged version of *La Havane* published in Cuba (1974), one can read the following: "No obstante los errores y el plagio de narradores cubanos de la época, la obra constituye un documento interesante para el lector cubano, por los temas, los panoramas y la visión colonizante que encierra sus páginas" ["Despite its errors and the plagiarism of contemporary Cuban fiction writers, the work is an interesting document for Cuban readers, because of the subjects, tableaux, and colonizing vision its pages contain"].¹¹ Merlin's Cuban publishers invoke a hostile reading of the text. Their political reading brands Merlin's colonialist penchants as merely interesting, but never as a valid—if erroneous—part of the contentious discussion of Cuba by Cubans themselves. Similarly, in her introduction to a translation of *Mes douze premières années* recently published in Havana, Nora Araújo denounces Merlin for her "vinculación con la burguesía esclavista cubana" ["links with the Cuban slaveholding bourgeoisie"] (*Mis doce primeros años* 24).¹² The contrast with the covers of *La Habana* is curious. Published in exile, the book seems to profess the golden virtues of silence: its back cover is entirely blank. For Genette, those empty covers, "presque muettes" ["almost mute"] (29), commonly used by such publishing houses as Gallimard and Minuit, exhibit a certain "discretion" which is "évidemment un signe extérieur de noblesse" ["evidently an external sign of nobility"] (29). But, in Merlin's case, this circumspect space works against the text's reception among many Cubans, for whom nobility—particularly linked to the writer's French title—is a sign of foreignness. Instead of (re)presenting the author, the back cover perpetuates her problematic status. Furthermore, the book's spine even suppresses her, for her name does not appear there. As for the front cover, it showcases the seal of Havana, whose heraldic crown, rampant lion and fields of gold are one more token of imported aristocracy. It comes as no surprise, then, that in his preface to *La Habana*, Pedro Laín Entralgo refers to Merlin as "doña María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Cárdenas, Montalvo y O'Farrill" (3). The back cover's blank nobility is obliquely mirrored in this absurd designation.

The metamorphoses of author's name and book title do not end with the editions of Merlin's works. Modern Cuban authors have variously played with

11. Literary historians and critics have repeatedly and negatively underscored Merlin's plagiarism of other Cuban authors, but it is a more complex issue than what the publishers suggest here. See Figarola-Caneda (252-53), Méndez Rodenas ("A Journey to the (Literary) Source" 713), Díaz ("Merlin's Foreign House" 77n7).

12. Martín discusses "the dilemma Merlin faced between her Romantic ideals on individual freedom and her mercenary interests tied to slavery" (40).

the possible symbols that her singular literary persona affords. In *Holy Smoke*, a long essay about tobacco written in English, Cabrera Infante modifies both author and title: "After her trip to Havana in 1840 the Comtesse de [sic] Merlin . . . published in Paris a book called, inevitably, *Voyage à la Havane* [sic]" (155). The irony is inevitable, for never was there an author named Comtesse de Merlin nor a book entitled *Voyage à la Havane*. The identity of both vanishes even as Condesa de Merlín and *Viaje a la Habana* are apocryphally "re-translated" into the original French in Cabrera Infante's telling simulacrum. Reinaldo Arenas's uses of Merlin are equally revealing. A reader of *La Havane*, Arenas occasionally adopted "Condesa de Merlin" as a pseudonym. One of his last works is entitled "Viaje a La Habana" and has an epigraph from Merlin's work: "¡Sólo encuentro un montón de piedras sin vida y un recuerdo vivo!" ["I only find a lifeless pile of stones and a living memory"] (97). Arenas's novella begins with a snowstorm in New York, which is then followed by a narration of the exiled protagonist's journey to Havana. Moreover, a character in one of Arenas's novels, *La Loma del Ángel*, is Merlin herself. Arenas's textual and paratextual engagement with Merlin is a clear sign of recognition, both in the sense of rediscovering a little-known writer and of seeing himself somehow reflected in her marginal position.¹³

One thing which sets Merlin apart from other Cuban authors is the intense preoccupation which others—critics, poets, fiction writers—have shown with her name and titles, both nobiliary and literary. She seems to live more in her paratexts than in her texts. Before entering into Merlin's works, readers inevitably linger on their threshold, those elements surrounding the published text which attempt to present her, but which often end up diverting the flow and meanings of her writing. By writing this essay, I have contributed to the notion that in such "minor" things as prefaces and book covers resides an important—albeit largely unacknowledged—key to the meanings of the text, or to understanding Merlin's work. As mentioned earlier, the name of Mercedes Merlin is the one she employed as a signature, and, in many ways, it is the one which best expresses her habitation in two worlds. But the truth of the matter is that her literary name is Comtesse Merlin, or Condesa Merlin (or de Merlin) in Spanish; and the title of her main work is *La Havane* or *La Habana*, and *Viaje a la Habana* is the title of an abridged translation. I do not wish to proffer any single name as Merlin's true identity, not even the unassuming, bicultural Mercedes Merlin. My hope is that by lingering on the threshold and thus, perhaps, taking this journey around the paratext to an end, we, as readers and critics, may become aware of the strategic importance for literary history and other cultural institutions of such seemingly insignificant details. Then, the real journey can

13. For a close reading of Merlin's role in *La Loma del Ángel*, see Olivares.

begin, into the textual heart of *La Havane*.

Two years after my arrival in Yarmouth, I moved once again, this time diagonally across the United States to Los Angeles. Having spent most of my life near the Atlantic Ocean, I was skeptical about what the Pacific could say to me, an exile from another shore. But the landscape of California is written in Spanish, inscribed with the names of its Spanish and Mexican past and with the exotic dreamings of its newer American community. If the Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río Porciúncula can become L.A., New England's Bridge and Elm Streets can give way, across the prairies, mountains and deserts, to arteries named Figueroa and Sepulveda [Sepúlveda]; or Anita [Annie Street!], Carmelita and Carmelina; or Los Bonitos, Los Caballeros and Los Diegos [The Pretty, The Gentlemen and The Diegos], alphabetically recalling the improbable world of Zorro near Griffith Park.¹⁴ Even the city's very own Sunset Boulevard is translated into a dubious Puesta del Sol in the Hispanic never-never land of neighboring Santa Barbara. But then again, north of there, bespeaking colonial New Spain, the Santa Ynez Mountains authentically preserve the archaic spelling of Inés. Is this Emerson's and Melville's America, or is it in fact another country? The United States is so vast and the people who inhabit it so various that a certain measure of strangeness is always somewhere to be found. Somebody from Maine who came to the curious cosmopolis of Los Angeles, looking at the palm trees and freeways, would perhaps think she's not in her country anymore, while a boy from California, taken to a prep school in New England, might feel unquestionably out of place. This is the case of Josh Gidding, who writes about his first snowfall:

One morning, just after Thanksgiving my first term at Exeter, I looked out the dormer window of my tiny room on the flight deck of Wheelwright and saw the world transformed into a postcard: the legendary white landscape of a New England winter. Legendary, anyway, for me—a Los Angeles boy. Those who inhabited such scenes, and took them for granted, were, to my mind, a breed apart. I did not think I could ever be one of them myself. But now I was, for the time being at least. The snow lay shockingly white and pure—so properly Eastern, so austere—around the buildings across Main Street. (77)

Recalling as they do Merlin's first taste of winter, Gidding's words can also describe, I imagine, the experience of Yarmouth's Cuban students. What ties bind them together? Despite his being an American, Gidding describes his feeling of estrangement in the heart of New England. Despite their being Cuban, Merlin and Yarmouth's schoolboys had lives in other countries and other languages. Strangeness, it seems, is not as strange as one is sometimes wont to

14. Rieff says about Los Angeles's street names and architecture: "The Spanish names that the Anglo founders of Los Angeles chose as street names, as much as the architectural styles that they favored for both civic and residential architecture, were chosen consciously. Though they were clearly inspired by genuine Spanish colonial buildings like the hotel that Governor Pico had erected on what became North Main Street, these buildings were as much grafts on the landscape as the (imported) eucalyptus trees that shaded the better neighborhoods of early twentieth-century L.A." (70).

think. All it takes is looking in unfamiliar places, acknowledging ghosts, and whole communities can be reimagined. Official inscriptions tell the stories of Blaisdells and Cogswells shipwrecked on the coast of Maine, but Gómez and García also roam the streets of Yarmouth. Literary histories tell the stories of Martí and Villaverde, but Mercedes Merlin writes another version of Havana. English is the language of the United States and Spanish that of Cuba, but landscapes and literature tell a different story.

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