Inexacting Whiteness: Blanqueamiento as a Gender-Specific Trope in the Nineteenth Century

ABSTRACT

In Cuba, race, nation, and popular music were inextricably linked to the earliest formulations of a national identity. This article examines how the racialized discourse of blanqueamiento, or whitening, became part of a nineteenth-century literary narrative in which the casi blanca mulata, nearly white mulatta, was seen as a vehicle for whitening black Cubans. However, as the novels of Cirilo Villaverde and Ramón Meza reveal, the mulata’s inability to produce entirely white children established the ultimate unattainability of whiteness by nonwhites. This article analyzes the fluidity of these racial constructs and demonstrates that, while these literary texts advocated the lightening of the nation’s complexion over time, they also mapped the progressive “darkening” of Cuban music as popular culture continued to borrow from black music.

RESUMEN

En Cuba, y desde un principio, los discursos sobre raza, nación y música popular se vinculan a los conceptos de una identidad nacional. En este artículo se examina la incorporación del proceso discursivo del blanqueamiento a la narrativa literaria del siglo xix. Dicho discurso asignó a “la mulata casi blanca” el papel de agente homogenizador, responsable de fomentar el blanqueamiento del negro cubano. Sin embargo, como las novelas de Cirilo Villaverde y Ramón Meza revelan, el poder reproductivo de la mulata se ve limitado al no poder traspasar las fronteras raciales que establecían lo que implicaba ser “blanco” en Cuba. Este artículo analiza la fluidez que caracteriza estas construcciones raciales y demuestra que, mientras que estos textos literarios abogaban por el blanqueamiento de la futura nación, también señalan cómo la música cubana se fue “oscureciendo” progresivamente a medida que el elemento Afrocubano fue influyendo en la cultura popular.

No nos queda más remedio que blanquear y blanquear.
José Antonio Saco, 1835

Race, nation, and popular music were inextricably linked within the earliest discursive formulations of a Cuban national identity. As early as 1835, José
Antonio Saco, generally recognized as the earliest “apostle” of Cuban nationalism, argued that miscegenation was the only viable means of incorporating Afro-Cubans into the eventual Cuban nation. In a letter to Gonzalo Alfonso, Saco suggested that if Cuba was to have a place in the world of nations it had no alternative “but to whiten and whiten.” In the aftermath of Britain’s 1833 abolition of slavery in its Caribbean colonies, Saco argued for a racial process that would result in eventual citizenship for the descendants of Cuban slaves, provided that they first became ethnically a lighter-skinned people and shed their African cultural practices.

In “Carta de un cubano a un amigo suyo,” first published in Havana in 1844, Saco outlined precisely how Afro-Cubans could be racially and culturally assimilated into the national project:

If mestizos are born from the union of a white woman and a black man, this would be regrettable. This would diminish our white population and weaken it in every conceivable aspect; but since the contrary is true [i.e. unions between black women and white men are more common], far from considering it a danger, I consider it positive. The great illness of the Island of Cuba consists in the immobility of the black race. By preserving her color and primitive origin, she remained separated from the white race by an impenetrable barrier: but mobilize it, mix it with the other race, allow it to find its movement and then the barrier will start to collapse in stages, until it finally disappears.”

For Saco, racial purity and class privilege could be ensured through a dual reproductive process. First, Afro-Cuban women in unions with lighter-skinned partners would produce progressively whiter children. And second, legal and social surveillance over white Creole women would guarantee racial purity. Over time, the collective complexion of the island would lighten.

In this article I explore how the racialized discourse of blanqueamiento becomes part of a national literary narrative in which the mulata functioned as a site to discursively organize elements of race, gender, and class. The image of the eroticized mythic mulata is the creation of a white imaginary eager to contain racial anxieties in a troubled colonial context that simultaneously sought to construct a national identity and to resolve Cuba’s race problem. This article examines how race and gender intersected in the Cuban novel, specifically in Cirilo Villaverde’s canonical Cecilia Valdés (1882) and Ramón Meza’s almost forgotten Carmela (1887), to promote blanqueamiento as part of a broader national narrative. I shift the analysis from the mulata to the concept of the casi blanca, or almost-white female character, away from the iconic mulata — so sexualized and fetishized in scholarly treatments — and argue that, whereas blanqueamiento was seen as a means to whiten to the point of passing, it was precisely the mulata’s almost-white status that established the ultimate unattainability of whiteness by nonwhites.

In the final section of this article, I analyze the counter-hegemonic role that
music and dance, particularly the dance known as danza, played in challenging the construct of whiteness that is so central to these novels. I ask, what specific notions of race traveled between literary and musical forms? While the literary texts functioned as a platform to ideologically enact the goals of blanqueamiento, that is, to lighten the nation’s complexion with each successive generation, at the level of popular music, how was the epidermis of Cuban music darkening over time and escaping surveillance?

**Cross-Racial Love and the National Novel**

The impulse to both legitimize and promote a national literature is best exemplified by the efforts of a Cuban intellectual and wealthy slave owner, Domingo Delmonte. In the 1830s, Delmonte’s tertulias literarias (literary circle) fomented a previously unknown literary scene in Havana. In practical terms, the tertulias promoted the circulation of often censored texts as well as the opportunity to exchange ideas. Delmonte argued in favor of a literary tradition “anchored in the immediate concerns of the local community.” Most importantly, Delmonte sponsored a group of young writers concerned with the evils and abolition of slavery and the moral deficiencies of Creole elites dependent upon the plantation system and corrupted by gambling and permissive sexual behavior, a privileged society invested in the conspicuous consumption of frivolous European fashions.

The literary works that resulted from Delmonte’s group coincided with a period of intense literary production that came to be understood as the birth of the Cuban novel. These works, traditionally classified as antislavery narratives, tended to exhibit a collective preoccupation with racial and class hierarchies crucial in the articulation of the future Cuban nation.

The novels that resulted from Delmonte’s Tertulias are characterized by interracial love triangles that often concluded in the tragic death of one of the main characters. The romance between mulatos and whites projected in the Cuban novel does not constitute the ideal national marriage Doris Sommer describes between “whites and Indians” in the nineteenth-century Latin American context. In the Cuban novel, miscegenation was sanctioned only when it involved women of color and white men, thus adhering to a legal system that limited interracial marriage to poor white men and women of color.

In Cecilia Valdés and Carmela, love stories are the central organizing theme. The impossibility of cross-racial love is assumed by contemporary readers acquainted with the class and racial boundaries that defined the characters. While the expressed goal of the Cuban novel before the 1870s was the identification of the unique elements of Cuban literature, after the 1880s Cuban writers appear markedly more concerned to sketch the acceptable boundaries of social change after the abolition of slavery and before the achievement of independence.
Cecilia Valdés often reads more like a travel guide to a colonial slave society than a tragic love story. The plot unfolds around two interlocking love triangles. The first consists of Cecilia Valdés, a free mulata; Leonardo Gamboa, the wealthy white señorito who is her half brother; and Isabel Ilincheta, the virtuous and kind young white lady engaged to Leonardo. The second triangle comprises Cecilia Valdés, Leonardo Gamboa, and the free mulato José Dolores Pimienta, a tailor and part-time musician who will sacrifice his freedom and perhaps his life for Cecilia’s love. However, in spite of the initial importance of the love stories to the plot development, they eventually become secondary to a detailed discussion of the cuna dances sponsored by wealthy mulatas, dinner parties hosted by Havana’s Creole elite, the description of the latest fashion, local cuisine, and urban and rural sights, and a denunciation of the slave trade and the institution of slavery, all of which are validated by long, historically grounded, anticolonial passages.

Carmela’s plot also revolves around two interlocking love triangles. However, at least in its early chapters, Carmela offers the possibility of an interracial marriage through elopement. The first triangle is made up of Joaquín, a timid white señorito who belongs to an elite Creole family recently impoverished by the abolition of slavery; Carmela, a mulata described as “casi de raza pura” (almost racially pure); and Luisa, the beautiful and virtuous young white woman whose wealth would save Joaquín’s family from financial ruin and a consequent social eclipse (102–3). The second triangle includes Carmela, Joaquín, and Assam, the wealthy Chinese immigrant who offers to marry Carmela when she is abandoned by Joaquín. Like Cecilia, Carmela suffers temporary insanity, gives birth to a lighter skinned child, is abandoned by her white lover, and is left in abject poverty and without social protection when Assam commits suicide after she has publicly humiliated him.

In order to comprehend fully the racialized and gendered politics of a Cuban national discourse, one must also pay careful attention to the representation of women and to how this representation was used to reproduce national culture and to signify racial conflicts within the nation. In the half century before independence, the increased anxieties of race were gendered and feminized in a number of critical antislavery novels that incorporated either the romantic ideal of the Creole white woman, the tragic feminized mulato, or the black/mulata slave who was either raped or seduced and for whom love was not attainable under slavery.

Although Cecilia Valdés and Carmela continued to represent the romantic ideals of nineteenth-century womanhood articulated in antislavery novels, I argue that the key to these two novels is the articulation of sexualized anxieties that depended on gender-specific racialized tropes. An examination of Cecilia and Carmela reveals the recurrence of blanqueamiento as the dominant motif. This is especially true of the mulata and her children. In addition, I believe that
although blanqueamiento encouraged mestizaje, its primary goal was to maintain white supremacy. Racial purity and class privilege were ensured through the legal and social control of the elite, white criolla women. Thus, it is important to recognize that while the literary discourse of the period promoted blanqueamiento, it only did so within specified social boundaries. In the novels under discussion, miscegenation was restricted to hypogamous relationships that assumed easy access for white men to women of color, that is, relationships between free and slave mulatas (Cecilia and Carmela) and white señoritos (Leonardo and Joaquín). Thus, while miscegenation inherently promoted “whiteness,” it also underscored the ultimate unattainability of this category for nonwhite women. In the case of the mulata, the aesthetics of skin color are gendered and sexualized to symbolize a desire for racial homogeneity. In the case of elite white women, racial purity was exemplified through a literary discourse that emphasized chastity, virtue, domesticity, and motherhood.

Anne McClintock has so aptly stated that “all nationalisms are gendered,” in that “not only are the needs of the nation typically identified with the frustrations and aspirations of men, but the representation of male ‘national’ power depends on the prior construction of ‘gender differences’.” The mechanisms that facilitate the invention of specific national discourses and the ways in which these nationalisms are performed vary depending on the localized histories of different national and political contexts. In the case of Cuba, I would add that founding nationalist discourses were expressly dependent upon the intersection of gender and racial differences not only as a means of managing Cuba’s rapidly changing social circumstances, but also to limit the cultural hybridization that characterized late-nineteenth-century Cuba.

While Cecilia Valdés and Carmela overtly endorse whitening, they also reveal the inherent limitations and contradictions of blanqueamiento and the profound difficulties of incorporating the free population of color into the Cuban national project. In these novels, the best a person of color can hope for for themselves or their offspring is the condition of becoming casi blanca. Although the term casi blanca describes the skin color and physical characteristics of an individual who could actually pass as white, it is consistently used in the literature precisely as a marker of color. By analogy, a person of color cannot hope for full integration into civil society. Thus, it is precisely the recognition of racial anxieties in relationship to miscegenation in individual lives that proves the ultimate undesirability of unconditional racial equality as a collective political project.

**Sexual Attitudes and Sexual Values**

In *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*, Verena Martínez-Alier examines numerous legal documents and court cases in an effort to
illuminate the racial attitudes and sexual values that shaped public policy in Cuba’s colonial slave society. She argues that the practice of elopement and seduction proved to be an efficient challenge to the legal barriers that restricted interracial and interclass marriage in nineteenth-century Cuba. Martínez-Alier’s conclusion suggests that female virtue and family honor could be easily manipulated to achieve interracial marriages and was often a powerful antidote in overcoming parental opposition. She writes that in both elopement and seduction, “The woman on the whole was expected to play a passive role. She acquiesced, confident in the good faith of her suitor. She was necessarily largely passive for she was the pawn that was played in the competition for honour. It was in relation to them that the attitudes of the other parties were adjusted. These parties were the couple’s parents, predominantly the girl’s parents, and the suitor.”

In either case, the loss of sexual honor becomes public knowledge and the woman’s family is required to seek retribution in order to restore the family’s honor. In the case of elopement, men aimed at marriage, and as long as class and color differences between the two families remained within acceptable boundaries, questions of female virtue and honor took precedence, and parental approval was easily obtained. As we will see in Carmela, the legal system, at least as portrayed in the literature, treated interracial elopement as simple seduction. For mulatas like Carmela, skin color was automatically the contested category that took precedence over questions of virtue. Color also played an important role in terms of gender privilege. The virtue of white males, like Joaquin, was not degraded because they sought sexual liaisons with women of color.

Approximately two-thirds of the applications for interracial marriage licenses in the nineteenth century that Martínez-Alier recorded “contained the official verdict” and “in two thirds of these the requested permit is granted” (63). However, this statistic can be misleading in terms of gender privilege. The petitions indicate that the vast majority of these cases involved a white man of lower social status, often a recent immigrant, and a parda (a light-skinned woman of color) or mulata of higher class position. In this instance, a man was able to exploit the social value of whiteness as a means of elevating his class position, while a woman of color was able to trade her class position to transgress legal racial barriers. However, the opposite was true in the case of a white woman attempting to marry a nonwhite male. For a woman, whiteness was the definitive characteristic which afforded her a high social value while it simultaneously restricted her agency. Unlike white men, white women were not able to trade color in order to advance class position. But most importantly, white females were the property of white males, property that was jealously guarded and legally prohibited to men of color.
Thus, in the case of a *mulata* like Cecilia Valdés, social value is determined by the color of her skin. Cecilia’s grandmother, Seña Chepa, reminds her that she is “almost white” and therefore “can aspire to marry a white man” (14). Here Seña Chepa suggests that *mulatas* could exploit the social value of their skin color, which in turn affords them opportunity to cross racial boundaries. However, unlike white men, Cecilia is told to trade skin color not for class position but to advance the “purity of her blood.” While interracial marriages are not possible, interracial relationships and the reproduction of a whiter generation of *mulatos* is at the center of these narratives.

The practice of seduction presents a very different problematic since it functioned primarily as an affirmation of male virility. Contrary to elopement, which is meant to coerce the woman’s family to agree to marriage, seduction usually caused the woman’s family to appeal to the authorities for legal redress. As with elopement, the intersection between race, gender, and class was socially determined so that these categories combined in accordance with existing biases. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that seduction most often resulted in interracial cohabitation and that these relationships were hypergamous in nature. Cecilia’s seduction and Carmela’s elopement both result in their subsequent abandonment; neither character is able to benefit from the protection of the law. In both instances, their white suitors opted to marry white women. Thus, the narrative itself punishes these female characters for crossing racial and class boundaries while the male characters are never held accountable.

Martínez-Alier’s research thus indicates that white Creoles, far from exhibiting a relaxed attitude toward miscegenation, actively sought support from the legal system to police and foster racial purity through the control of their daughters’ sexuality and, hence, of the family lineage. However, the desire by Creoles to regulate interracial marriage laws not only speaks to racial anxieties and male privilege, it also constitutes a legal means of preventing the transference of Creole property to nonwhites, including the right of inheritance. This is particularly relevant for white Cubans living in a colonial society where slavery continued to be a reality and where free people of color composed a significant percentage of the population. Ultimately, the policing of interracial marriage laws ensures that men of color are not able to have access to white women or Creole property. Furthermore, interracial marriage laws functioned as a means of legally excluding a significant number of nonwhite women and their children from receiving the economic protection and social respectability that accompany marriage. Hence, interracial cohabitation is viewed as a natural extension of the hypergamous relationships that resulted from slavery. Thus, the fact that many women of color are single mothers does not challenge the social order of a slave or a society where emancipation occurred only recently and virtue and family honor are granted only to white women.
Villaverde’s “Bronze Virgen”

Three years prior to the publication of the final version of *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), Villaverde published the novel’s prologue. The publication coincided with a period of intense political agitation marked by the signing of the vastly unpopular Pact of Zanjón (1879), on the eve of the Guerra Chiquita (1879–1880). In the prologue, Villaverde explained the forty-one-year gap between the publication of the novel’s first two chapters in 1839 and the completed text in 1882, a period of time that coincided with his prolonged political exile in the United States. In what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have described as “the culture play of diaspora,” Villaverde blurred the familiar lines of the “here” and the “there” to draw a parallel between the exiled intellectual’s use of the “pen” and the *mambises’* use of the “rifle.” In so doing, Villaverde suggests that the organic intellectual’s political work was equal in importance to armed struggle in the service of national self-determination.

What reading is Villaverde attempting to frame? Above all, Villaverde wants the reader to understand that *Cecilia Valdés* is not “mere fiction” but the “product of maturity and historical experience.” Villaverde offers the following explanation in defense of the authenticity of the characters and the events: “Far from inventing or faking personalities and fantasy scenes, I have taken realism, as I understand it, to the point where the main characters in the novel are presented with warts and all.” He claims not only that the main characters share the first and last name of the real people they represent but that they also wear the same styles of clothing, mimic their speech patterns, and resemble them in both physical appearance and moral character. Villaverde’s emphasis on the authenticity of the characters and events reveals a desire to blur the epistemological distinctions that traditionally define fiction and history: *Cecilia Valdés*’s narrative is meant to articulate the evolving history of the nation.

Sommer argues that this canonical text is uncooperative, in that it “lures the so-called competent reader with touristic invitations to intimacy” only to allow “limited access,” thereby undermining the reader’s authority. That is, she understands Villaverde’s narrator as unpredictable. Sommer is concerned with how readers make sense of this narrative “chaos” and how they are ultimately able to put the story together in spite of the narrator. However, I would suggest that Villaverde in fact wants the text to be comprehensible, leading him to narrow the reader’s margin of interpretation by integrating didactic sections in which he deliberately inserts political and literary figures who were well known to nineteenth-century readers such as Varela, Saco, Delmonte, and the Captain General Francisco. Likewise during the artisan-sponsored “Dance for Color People,” the narrator groups famous black and *mulato* nineteenth-century musicians, composers, and poets into this single
social event. Cecilia herself socializes with Plácido (the famous mulato poet executed in 1844), dances with Brindis (the legendary black musician), and casually chats about contradanzas with Tomás Vuelt a y Flores (the famous violinist and composer) (165). Therefore, Villaverde in the prologue and the narrator in the text are dependent upon the “knowledgeable eye” of the Cuban reader to recognize and supplement the aesthetics of race and class in this text of the emerging Cuban nation.

In writing the prologue to Cecilia Valdés, Villaverde was seeking to establish his legacy within the Cuban literary tradition while laying out the foundations for the new realist Cuban novel. However, what Villaverde could probably not foresee was the vast attention literary critics would invest in Cecilia Valdés over the next one hundred years. By the end of the nineteenth century, the novel had received unparalleled critical attention from Cuba’s most celebrated writers and critics. Thus, Cecilia Valdés had not only joined the newly created Cuban canon but was established as the founding text of Cuban realism.

In the twentieth century, Cecilia Valdés has been read primarily as an antislavery text. Most critics have focused on the narrative structure of the novel and how cultural and social elements interrelate to offer the reader a broad colonial historical picture. In part, these readings are predicated on the notion that this novel is a carefully constructed text aimed at correcting the private and public morality of the Cuban bourgeoisie, a process Aida de Toro González describes in terms of a “healing project” that attempted to cleanse the customs of the ruling class by emphasizing “the imperative need to carry out a transformation of their way of life.” This perspective is rooted in a nineteenth-century discourse that advocated the abolition of slavery on the grounds that it was as corrupting of the master as it was of the slave.

More recently, the literary criticism on Cecilia Valdés has centered on what is widely understood as the Cuban cult of the mulata. Wheras the mulata functioned as a mythic symbol of racial integration in Cuba, only recently has the cult of the mulata been analyzed as “representative of a racialized and sexualized cultural iconography that offers an alternate mythic foundation” for the nation. This contemporary criticism parallels similar insights into other texts and genres achieved by both feminist critics and more recent theorists of cultural studies. However, while these theoretical frameworks facilitate the study of race and gender in isolation or in combination, an additional perspective is necessary to ground particular texts in the concrete historical moments of their production. Thus, what is necessary at this juncture is an integrated analysis of both race theories and the cultural politics that produced a unique, and quite long-lasting, Cuban aesthetic of race and gender.

This aesthetic can be seen near its point of genesis with Villaverde’s construction of gender in Cecilia Valdés. Villaverde draws a connection between women and nation when he dedicates Cecilia Valdés to “Cuban women,”
whom he addresses as “dear compatriots who reflect the most beautiful aspect of the nation.” Villaverde articulates a national identity in which women contribute to a process of national formation by “mothering” the nation and transmitting culture while at the same time serving as privileged signifiers of national uniqueness. In Villaverde’s case the process is also highly racialized when he links this widely accepted construction of women to the problematic project of blanqueamiento. The privileging of white as a racial identity, in turn, requires the control of white women and their sexuality to guard the privileged site of reproduction and foster racial purity.

In contrast to white women, the highly sexualized mulata fulfills a different role in the national project. She functions as a homogenizing racial agent that fosters the whitening of the Afro-Cuban population through miscegenation while also serving as a magnet to draw young landless peasant farmers from Spain. In order to accomplish this task, she requires a degree of sexual freedom without practical social limits. Mulatas, like Cecilia, might seem at first to occupy a contestatory role that challenges patriarchal notions of domesticity, female honor, and virtue while interrogating the boundaries of whiteness through the reproduction of ever-lighter generations of mulatos. Cecilia’s family history replicates this whitening pattern along a matrilineal line of free women of color and white male partners: a black great-grandmother (Magdalena Morales), who is almost entirely absent from the text and is only seen in a shadowy background; a cooper-hued mulata grandmother (Seña Chepilla Alarcón); a light skinned mulata mother (Seña Charito); and Cecilia Valdés, a casi blanca often mistaken for white. In Villaverde’s and Meza’s narratives, casi blancas like Cecilia and Carmela and their darker-skinned mothers are discarded from the text once they have completed their reproductive function. Thus, while Villaverde views that function as critical to the collective myth of nation, he refuses to socially sanction an individual case of racialized sexual transgression.

Villaverde’s endorsement of blanqueamiento is dependent upon a view of miscegenation that runs counter to the inherently exploitative nature of master–slave sexual relationships. In the following passage, the narrator paints a detailed portrait of idealized hybrid beauty: “Her type was that of the virgins depicted by the most celebrated painters. A high forehead, crowned with copious black hair, with a natural wave, united regular features, a straight nose that originated from the eyebrows. . . . Her eyebrows imitated an arc and emphasized the black almond-shaped eyes. . . . Her mouth was small and her lips full, indicating voluptuousness rather than strength of character. The cheeks were full and round with a dimple in the middle of the chin, forming a beautiful ensemble, which would be perfect, if only the facial expression were less malicious, if not malevolent.”

Cecilia is the embodiment of a uniquely Cuban aesthetic. Like Sab, she is
the perfect mestiza, a metaphor of the nationalist imagination in which she is neither Spanish nor African. In analyzing Cecilia Valdés’s characters, Castellano and Castellano ask: “And Cecilia? Cecilia is Cuba. Not the ideal of patriotic dreams, but what is authentic in a colonial reality.”26 And like the colonial society in which she lives, she is “liminal and in transition.”27

Cecilia’s femininity was a combination of extreme beauty marred only by a facial expression fraught with malice. A description that sets her in stark contrast to her rival, Isabel Ilincheta, Leonardo’s kind and virtuous fiancée. Isabel’s most attractive feature is her “languid expression” framed simply by “light eyes and thin lips” (87). Cecilia’s curvaceous body is also contrasted to Isabel’s angular, unfeminine body. The narrator explains that by virtue of exercise, Isabel also failed to possess the “soft and round forms” characteristic of young women in her own social circle (88). The narrator emphasizes that Isabel carried herself with a “resolved and masculine air” that was further accentuated by “the trace of dark silky fuzz that shadowed her upper lip and only lacked frequent shaving to become a black and thick mustache” (88). These remarks are made as if to explain to the reader why Leonardo felt “respect, admiration, fondness maybe” for Isabel and not the “abandonment” and “volcanic passion” he professed for Cecilia (183).

In Cecilia’s case she must employ her compelling beauty and skin color in exchange for social status. Seña Chepa reminds Cecilia that her father, “is a white gentleman” and that she is thus “almost white” (14). So therefore she can aspire to marry a white man. In discussing Cecilia’s options for marriage, Seña Chepa tells her, “You should know that a white man, even if poor, can be a suitable husband, while a mulato or a black man just won’t do even if he has all the money in the world. I speak from experience” (14). That is, Cecilia’s beauty and relative whiteness provide her marital access to white men and thus elevate her social status within the raza de color while ensuring even more whiteness for her offspring. This, then, is the reason Cuban women of light color would want to embrace blanqueamiento.

The question for Villaverde, no less than for Saco, becomes, How do race and national identity combine into the seemingly contradictory racial project of blanqueamiento? Whitening in Cecilia Valdés is illustrated through the representation of five generations of increasingly lighter-skinned mulatas, including Cecilia’s infant daughter whose color the narrator does not mention. However, the effacing of blackness through miscegenation is a quest for the “right skin color,” which is “casi blanca” rather than “white.” Even in the case of the venerated Cecilia Valdés, the narrator asks, “Well, to what race did this girl belong? It is difficult to tell” (7). However, the narrator immediately points out that, “To a knowing eye, it could not be hidden,” that is, the dark border that outlined the lips and the penumbra that marked the hairline. He thereby concludes that indeed “her blood was not pure” (7).
In *Cecilia Valdés*, the exclusivity of whiteness is reinforced through the notion that “real color” can be established through the physical characteristics of those who are not “truly white.” In Cecilia’s case, the visual markers that classified her as a *casi blanca* speak more plainly to her subordination and the unattainability of a white identity by those not born of “pure blood.” The fact that Cecilia belonged to what Villaverde described as “the hybrid and inferior race,” and worse yet the fear of giving birth to a darker skinned child described as a “*salta atrás*” (jump back) caused her to repudiate everything black or *mulato*.

In practical terms the determination of racial purity was based on specific visible physical characteristics. The notion of the “knowledgeable eye” is again enacted when Leonardo teases his friend, Pancho Sulfa. While discussing Roman legal statutes, the two friends begin to argue over the question of who is a person and what constitutes an object or a slave. Leonardo claims that, based on a specific physical characteristic, Poncho could be classified as a nonperson under Roman law: “You may not be a slave, but clearly one of your direct ancestors was; the curliness of your hair is suspect and proves as much” (38). Thus, the management of race is primarily achieved through the interpretation of visible markers. Pancho responds, “Lucky you whose hair is straight like that of an Indian” (38). Pancho thus counter-impugns by pointing out that Leonardo’s “straight hair” could indicate his racial impurity.

The argument between Leonardo and his friends suggests that the suspicion of racial contamination was not only restricted to third and fourth generation *mulatas* like Cecilia but that cultural surveillance was also enacted upon the racial history of individuals traditionally recognized as white. In a sense, to be Cuban born was sufficient to be racially suspect. Villaverde portrays a racially impure colonial world where even the racial genealogy of white upper-class Creole women like Rosa Gamboa is ultimately open to question. While defending his family’s racial purity to his friends, Leonardo admits a distinction between his father and mother based on place of birth. He argues that his father had nothing to hide because he is a Spaniard. On the other hand, Leonardo admits, “My mother is a Creole, and I cannot be fully certain that her blood is pure” (38). Here, Villaverde’s narrative locates itself within a national discourse that directly blamed Spanish colonialism for failing to impose the necessary moral and social control over white Creoles, thereby allowing the sexual excesses traditionally associated with the “Africans” to contaminate the morality of Creole white males.

**Carmela: Cecilia Valdés’s Younger Sister?**

Ramón Meza’s first novel, *Carmela*, was largely forgotten until it was re-published in 1978. When first published, *Carmela* was generally recognized as “Cecilia Valdés’s younger sister.” While Meza criticized Villaverde’s mel-
ancholic desire to recreate a lifestyle that had ceased to exist in Cuba for at least a half century, and never acknowledged any resemblance between the two novels. Instead, he argued that Villaverde failed to convince contemporary readers because they were eager to forget a painful past. If this is true, then what was Meza attempting to illustrate via *Carmela* one year after the end of slavery and on the eve of national independence?

Literary critics Isabel and Jorge Castellanos argue that Meza’s goal was not to write an abolitionist novel. They explain that *Carmela* should be viewed not as “imitating” an old literary model but as a “new Cuban social novel” that critically depicts the residual social consequences of Cuban slavery, the “many engendered illnesses of the infamous institution that had yet to be eradicated.”30 The Castellanos argue that while Villaverde sought to combat the economic and moral corruption inherent in colonialism, Meza’s goal was to confront his readers with the discrimination and segregation of Cuba’s colored population at a time when cross-racial national cohesion was essential to the goal of independence.

While Meza wished to remind the reading public that the social relations responsible for racial subordination and oppression in colonial Cuba were still present in the immediate aftermath of abolition, he also viewed *Carmela* as a critical response to *Cecilia Valdés*. However, rather than an imitation, *Carmela* is a re-vision on the question of racial identity in which possibilities for social mobility are reexamined under very different historical circumstances. Unlike Villaverde, whose description of the Cuban landscape and Cuban society was based on the memory of events forty years earlier, Meza’s *Carmela* was a realist representation of the present. The primary differences between the two novels lay in alternative constructions of the *mulata* and the appearance of a new ethnic factor in *Carmela* embodied in the character of a Chinese immigrant.

In both *Cecilia Valdés* and *Carmela*, character descriptions and basic plot devices largely overlap. Both narrative structures are dependent on the two previously described interlocking love triangles tracing *blanqueamiento* through multiple generations of *mulatas* destined to suffer tragic love and abandonment. Carmela’s mother, Doña Justa, is described as a very light-skinned *mulata* and a woman of impeccable honor, in spite of the fact that she has an illegitimate daughter whom she raises as her godchild. Doña Justa, like Cecilia’s mother, falls in love with a Spaniard who eventually abandons his colored family but financially provides for them. In *Carmela* and *Cecilia Valdés*, multiple abandonments essentially parallel each other. In both novels we find an absent white father, a white lover from an elite family, the birth of an illegitimate lighter-skinned child, and caring maternal figures with secrets to guard — Seña Chepa and Doña Justa — who eventually die of heart attacks because they cannot bear their granddaughter’s and daughter’s loss of honor through failed, illicit interracial love affairs.
However, beyond the similarities of characterization and plot development, _Cecilia Valdés_ and _Carmela_ reflect fundamentally different attitudes toward female beauty and agency and the possibility of cross-racial mobility. Cecilia and Carmela resemble each other in terms of their light skin, their youth, and their beauty. However, Meza’s Carmela does not exhibit the physical perfection or the sexualized beauty assigned to Villaverde’s Cecilia: “Her hair black and lustrous like ebony, although a bit course and short, fell in thick braids upon her back. Her arched eyebrows, long and curly eyelashes, softly shadowed her brilliant black eyes. The young lady on the high terrace was of medium stature; the back a bit wide, the arms a bit thick, the waist narrow, but they harmonized to present a charming ensemble of the lines that shaped her body robust and agile all at once” (16). Carmela’s face and angelical expression replicate the model of pure and virtuous womanhood traditionally assigned only to white women (153).

The initial relationship between Carmela and Joaquín is articulated in terms of an idyllic love story between two young people. The relationship flourishes under Doña Justa’s vigilance, as she has for some time sought a “good fiancé” for Carmela. However, as is to be expected, Joaquín’s parents, who belong to one of Havana’s best-known aristocratic families, oppose the relationship since Carmela is poor, illegitimate, and, worse yet, a _mulata_. While in Carmela’s and Joaquín’s presence, Don Julián enumerates the reasons why he is opposed to their courtship: “Madam, that young lady does not have a legitimate father; that young lady is not your godchild. . . . She is your daughter . . .” but most importantly she “is not white” (97). The reader has been aware of Carmela’s racial status for some time, as the narrator earlier described her as “almost of pure race,” with a skin color that “passed as white” (102). Up to this moment, Carmela believed she was white. However, it only takes Don Julián’s assertion to the contrary to dismantle her racial identity. Thus, in nineteenth-century Cuba, an individual’s assumption of whiteness, even when reinforced by an absence of African physical characteristics, ultimately required confirmation by individuals of wealth and high social status to defend a racial location classification beyond suspicion.

In spite of this new knowledge Joaquín decides to elope with Carmela. However, the one-night interlude in a discreet Marianao hotel does not produce the outcome Joaquín and Carmela had imagined. Doña Justa, deeply disappointed by their behavior, tells Carmela, “I would rather have seen you dead than in this situation” (118–19). At the same time, Doña Justa cautions Joaquín to fulfill his obligations: she will prosecute him unless he agrees to restore her daughter’s honor through marriage (119).

Meanwhile, Don Julián, fearing the legal outcome of elopement and the social stigma that would fall upon his son, decides to send Joaquín indefinitely to the United States. In the meantime, Carmela realizes she is pregnant and, in
order to hide her shame, retires to a country house, where she gives birth to a son. Like her mother, Carmela misrepresents her kinship with the child, claiming to be the infant’s aunt. Salvador Bueno argues that Carmela is part of an intergenerational cycle common to interracial relationships whereby the daughter is doomed to repeat the mother’s history (10). However, Carmela, unlike the female protagonists found in earlier antislavery novels, did not remained static and externalized in her tragic circumstances. Instead, she underwent two parallel transformations resulting in a character with greater complexity and agency.

Carmela evolves from an innocent, romantic young lady into an embittered, calculating woman willing to trade youth and beauty for wealth and security. Joaquín is replaced by the generous and well mannered Assam, a wealthy Chinese immigrant merchant. Meza’s detailed description of Assam and the development of his individuality is unique in this literary period. Previously, Chinese characters were featured only as indentured servants brought to Cuba to replace a dwindling slave population. In contrast, Assam represents a new type of entrepreneurial immigrant who arrived in Cuba hoping to enhance his fortune.

As a suitor, Assam must be worthy enough to replace Joaquín and sufficiently desirable to capture Carmela’s attention. When Carmela, who is initially reluctant to accept Assam’s gifts and romantic advances, finally agrees to marry him, it is with the knowledge that she does not and could not love him. Carmela agrees to marry Assam only because she was convinced that her physical beauty and racial status would enable her to control him and because she read his gentle nature as a “seal of subservience” (140). Carmela’s sense of racial superiority is derived from a cultural hierarchy that regarded the Chinese as “equal or worse” than slaves. However, in terms of interracial relationships, the Chinese had the legal right to marry people of any color since their skin color was often lighter than that of many Spaniards. This highlights a social contradiction in Cuban society. While skin color generally symbolized social status, legally white Chinese were held to be inferior by public opinion and custom.

Like Cecilia, Carmela represents the possibility of *blanqueamiento*. However, skin color and racial identification played out differently for each of these female characters. Cecilia never acknowledged her status as a *mulata*, even though Seña Chepa reminded her that her father was “a white gentleman” and referred to her as “almost white.” While Villaverde articulates race through Cecilia’s character, the character herself takes no part in the discussion of race. In contrast, Carmela comes to understand that Joaquín abandoned her because “he considered her to be racially inferior.” At the same time, she also observed that her son’s skin was “as white . . . as pure as his [Joaquín’s] skin.” It is this knowledge that motivated Carmela to interrupt the wedding. During the
marriage ceremony she raises her son in front of the congregation as clear evidence why the marriage should not go forward. Thus, unlike Seña Chepa and Doña Justa, who served as the guardians of their family secrets, Carmela was willing to reveal her dishonor, her “true” racial status and that of her illegitimate son in an attempt to seek redress against Joaquín and his family.

In spite of all her efforts, Carmela is ultimately not able to successfully cross class or racial barriers. Meza abruptly ends the novel after the dramatic scene in which Carmela is thrown out of church and into the street. Predictably her self-assertion quickly results in tragic consequences. Assam, confronted with evidence of Carmela’s continued love for Joaquín, commits suicide as a gesture of honor. Doña Justa dies of a heart attack upon hearing of the public scandal. Carmela thus is left alone and without protection. She finally takes refuge with Tocineta, a black male servant in Doña Justa’s house, who has always secretly loved her.

While both Cecilia Valdés and Carmela include examples of whitening and center around female protagonists who are unable to penetrate rigid class and racial barriers, they differ in several key areas. The construction of the two mulatas, Cecilia and Carmela, correspond to different social goals. The behavior of Villaverde’s Cecilia, reveals the inherent contradiction between blanqueamiento as a collective national project to implement racial progress, and the generalized fear of moral transgressions at the individual level. Cecilia’s tantalizing sexuality and unbridled passion, which seduce not only Leonardo but every male she comes in contact with, must be contained. Villaverde achieves this by constructing a character so superficial that she has no internal life whatsoever and who is at the whim of the author and the various male actors in the text. Not once does Cecilia reflect or question Seña Chepa about the circumstances surrounding her birth or her racial identity, in spite of the fact that she knows that a “white gentleman” financially supports the household and is adamantly opposed to her relationship with Leonardo. Neither does Cecilia question why her mother has been in an asylum from the time Cecilia was born. Even more troubling to critics is how Cecilia fails to realize that Leonardo is her half brother in spite of the overwhelming evidence. However, these lacunae are perfectly consistent with Villaverde’s need for a “feminine space” into which to insert his discussion of race. Carmela, unlike Cecilia, matures, that is, she becomes more aware of her situation with each disappointment, leading to her final understanding of the connection between her racial identity and Joaquín’s abandonment. Indeed, her self-knowledge survives a descent through a hierarchy of relationships in which each of her lovers possesses less class and racial status: Joaquín, Assam, and finally Tocineta.
The *Danza*: The Darkening of Cuban Music

In these novels, literature and dance come together to define a Cuban national identity. As early as the 1830s the novel played a central role in a national drama that mirrors Cuba’s contemporary political and cultural reality. In the novels I discussed in this article, *blanqueamiento* functioned as a rhetorical metaphor aimed at solving Cuba’s race problem. However, while promoting whiteness these novels also reveal the incorporation of black musical and dance forms into previously white genres, like the *danza*. Villaverde, and Meza to a lesser extent, used social dance and the discussion of musical genres, not unlike *blanqueamiento*, to discursively mitigate racial proximity. However, the inherent fluidity of popular music and dance allowed for a different national conversation outside of the static confines of the text and away from *blanqueamiento*. Black and *mulato* musicians and dancers (black, white, and *mulato*) also played a role in refashioning the style and bodily discourse of the *danza*.

In the twentieth century, Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz remarked that Cuban popular music was neither black nor white but a “*creación mulata*,” a hybrid formulation whose extraordinary vigor and captivating originality emerged from an early infusion of African subtexts and rhythms into European music.35 Decades before Ortiz formally articulated his theory of transculturation, he began to focus on multiple racialized cultural forms that gave meaning and cohesiveness to a Cuban national identity. As early as 1911, Ortiz reflected on the potential of popular music to further racial harmony and national solidarity, arguing that popular music was “the product of the collective genius of a people.”36 Ortiz understood music to be a public transcript capable of correcting the racially divisive and exclusionary nature that dominated the official history of the nation.

It is in this context that I wish to analyze the crucial role that social dance played in these novels. While *Cecilia Valdés* and *Carmela* remained within the ideological boundaries of whitening by actively reinforcing the de-Africanization of the Cuban population through miscegenation these novels also, perhaps entirely unintentionally, showcased the incorporation of blackness into white musical forms and dance in the nineteenth century. George Lipsitz has argued that culture allows people to “perform rehearsed identities, stances, and social relationships not yet permissible in politics.”37

In nineteenth-century Cuba, black music and dance had a similar subversive effect on the musical forms that white Cubans understood as white or European. These incursions into the dominant culture eventually darkened the cultural complexion of Cuban music. Ironically, while the objective of *blanqueamiento* was to lighten the complexion of the *casi blanca* with each successive generation, Cuban music progressively “darkened” in the nineteenth cen-
tury. Yet, Cuban intellectuals did not problematize this process until the advent of *afrocubanismo* in the twentieth century.

Not only did Villaverde describe, categorize, and map what he observed in a colonial slave society. He also sought to articulate uniquely Cuban cultural traits. Above all, he privileged the intimate connection between Cubans and dance. For Villaverde, “you know a people [nation] by how it dances,” and in Cuba, “no dance was comparable to the *danza.*” He insisted that by simply observing the slow rhythm *danza*, the observer could understand “the personality, the habits, the social and the political characteristics of Cubans.”

However, in *Cecilia Valdés*, the *danza* is refashioned in style and bodily discourse depending upon the color and status of the dancer and the location of the dance.

In the course of the novel, Villaverde faithfully narrates three social dances corresponding to Cuba’s racial hierarchy of white, *mulato*, and black. Villaverde’s detailed description of these three dances can be read as part of a general narrative style that characterized his work. In part, the events during the dance facilitate textual space for the young lovers to dialogue. This is particularly important in the case of interracial couples, like Cecilia and Leonardo and Carmela and Joaquín, whose textual contact would otherwise be restricted to sexual liaisons since their social spheres did not otherwise overlap. However, while Villaverde was faced with a literary imperative to facilitate dialogue, he also shifts back and forth between the storyline (slavery, incest, interracial love, and whitening) and the narration of music and dance because, like Ortiz, he believed music to be part of the “public transcript” capable of articulating a national narrative in which race played a central role.

The “aristocratic white dance,” sponsored by the Philharmonic Society, was restricted to the wealthiest and most powerful white Creole families in Havana. While Villaverde critiqued the Creole’s lifestyle, especially their frivolous spending and exuberant fashion, he also hierarchically ratified this dance as an exemplary cultural model. Like whiteness, elite white culture was socially constructed as the most desirable, while at the same time it was also understood to be unattainable from below. However, class was so strictly demarcated that Villaverde emphasized that even among elite white families, “a clear distinction remained between the Cuban bourgeoisie and those military families with closer ties to Spain” (82). Thus, suggesting that social status was not only about wealth and skin color but also required both cultural proximity and solidarity with the emerging Cuban national bourgeoisie.

The “Dance for Color People” was a dress ball hosted by free black and *mulato* artisans. Attendance was only by invitation and participants were required to adhere to a uniform dress code. Villaverde argued that the desire to imitate elite white Creole culture was transparent in the furnishings, decorations, fashion, and choice of dances. The dance was advertised as “*baile de etiqueta o de corte,*” in other words a “courteous or high tone” event. Villaverde
concluded that, far from reaching its goal, this dance could be understood as unintentional parody since the choices of danceable music and formal dress attire had long before ceased to be fashionable for whites (163). However, for this dance, Villaverde does not provide the reader with a description of the actual dancing, suggesting that perhaps he never attended a black and *mulato* segregated dance ball which would not have been common for a white man of his social status. Instead, Villaverde used the *baile de etiqueta* as an opportunity to incorporate dialogue between the novel’s black and *mulato* characters and famous literary and historical figures also from this community, such as Plácido, Brindis, and Tomás Vuelta y Flores. For the most part, the dialogue focuses on Cecilia’s obscure birth and how her alluring beauty captivates both men and women. In addition, the dialogue allowed white readers discursive access into the social life of free people of color, an aspect of Cuban culture few of them knew much about.

Far from mirroring the “*baile de etiqueta*,” the dress ball results in failed mimicry. The dance degenerates as the evening progressed. The dress code is ignored, thus allowing different social classes to mingle and to transgress seemingly insurmountable social barriers, particularly those between slaves and nonslaves. As in the case of Dionisio, Leonardo’s slave, presumes he has the right to dance with none other than Cecilia, his master’s lover. Ultimately, the evening unravels and culminates when José Dolores stabbed Dionisio in a street fight. Villaverde thus further suggests that in spite of their desire to emulate white Creole culture and in spite of their purchasing power, free blacks and *mulatos* remained inherently inferior because they were not able to control their tendency toward excess.40

The first dance Villaverde narrates is the *cuna* dance. Unlike the segregated white and black dance events, *cuna* dances were interracial private parties, hosted by middle age free *mulatas* of considerable economic means. Only in the *cuna* dances could Cubans from different racial and class backgrounds intermingle. They represented a perfect setting for the enactment of *blanqueamiento* because they offered *mulatas*, like Cecilia, Nemesia, and Carmela, the opportunity to exchange their beauty for the attention of a white suitor like Leonardo or Joaquín. In fact, soon after Doña Justa realized that a white suitor was courting Carmela, she hosted a *cuna* dance. Her action prompted the narrator to explain that “many believed that Doña Justa’s sole objective was to procure her godchild a proper fiancé” (26). Thus, *cuna* dances helped to formalize romantic relationships, at least for the young women. However, while these dances afforded *mulatas* social status within their own community, the white *señoritos* seemed to run some social risks. Villaverde points out that “the young white males” only began dancing with the *mulatas* at around eleven in the evening, that is, after “no white faces, at least no white women” stood in the crowd outside the window to witness them dancing (27).
However, *cuna* dances were both a rare space where interracial mingling could take place and a creative site where Spanish genres like the *contradanza* were refashioned and darkened to become the Cuban national dance, the *danza*.

In his nineteenth-century dictionary entry, José Miguel Macías defined the *danza* as a “true Cuban specialty.” He explained that the *danza* was “no other than the old Spanish *contradanza* modified by the warm and voluptuous climate of the tropics.” Villaverde also described the *danza*’s music as “plaintive and voluptuous” (87). Three decades later, the Cuban musicologist, Emilio Grenet classified the *danza* not just as a genuine Cuban musical genre but as “the noblest stream of pure music and the grandest Cuban form.” Like Macías and Villaverde, Grenet also argued that the *contradanza*’s rapid movements proved unsuited to Cuba’s tropical climate, leading it “toward the slower rhythm of its successor,” the *danza*. For them, the *danza* was a tropicalized version of an older Spanish musical genre. Like white Creoles, whose origins were Spanish, the *contradanza* had also transmuted and become Cuban. However, was the *danza* simply a response to the climate of the tropics? Or had the *contradanza* darkened and become *mulata*?

Villaverde’s novel offers the reader enough specificity to construct an integrative understanding that goes beyond the tropicalization of the *danza*. Woven into his discussion of the *cuna* dance is a discussion of how black and *mulato* musicians and dancers creatively mixed and altered the *danza*’s musical styles while maintaining the genre’s coherence. In the process of documenting the events at the “aristocratic white dance,” Villaverde described the *danza* as a very simple dance with comfortable and easy movements: “the gentleman leads the lady as if she is suspended in midair, the body merely moves to the rhythm, swinging as if in a dream, in the meantime his right arm surrounds her bodice, with the left hand he presses hers softly” (87). However, at the *cuna* dance, Villaverde remarked that *danza* dancers seemed to be in a fury of movement: “The feet moved incessantly as they were softly dragged to the rhythm of the music, the dancers mixed and pressed in the midst of a packed crowd of dancers and onlookers, as they moved up and down the dance floor without break or pause. Even above the deafening noise of the kettledrums, in perfect rhythm with the music, the monotonous and continuous swish sound made by the feet could be heard. Colored people believe this to be a requirement for keeping perfect rhythm to the *danza criolla*” (23). Villaverde had obviously observed both groups of dancers. However, in spite of the differences in style and rhythm between the two groups he makes no attempt to explain why the *danza* was danced differently in these two locations. He did, however, emphasize that the black and *mulato* musicians performed the *danza* while adhering to the European orchestration (three violins, one double bass, one small flute, a pair of kettledrums, and one clarinet) traditionally used (17). In discussing the *danza* that José Dolores composed for Cecilia, “Caramel
Candy for Sale,” Villaverde acknowledged his own bias by suggesting that people of color were born with a natural aptitude for music. He emphasized that José Dolores’s composition received applause “not only because the piece was good, but the listeners were knowledgeable” (27).

While Villaverde acknowledged the dynamism that existed between musicians and cuna dancers, he failed to directly address the borrowings of black music and dance and its influence on what he considered the most Cuban of all dances, the danza. The fact that white señoritos like Leonardo and Joaquín traveled between the cunas and Creole dances, and that mulatos and mulatas like Cecilia, Uribe, and José Dolores traveled back and forth between black and mulato dances and the cunas, suggests that the danza was darkening as it was being transported back and forth between the three racialized locations. While we have no idea how the danza was danced in the “Dance for Color People” or the extent to which these dancers refashioned this dance, we do know that, over time, the danza continued to darken at that same time that it gained currency as an expression of popular culture. For instance, three years after the publication of Cecilia Valdés, Macías explained in a dictionary reference that the danza had fully transitioned into popular culture and that composers derived the themes from “favorite operas, common people’s chants, and the songs of blacks.” He added that no sooner was a danza composed than “young and old, blacks and whites” were learning it. While blanqueamiento promoted the whitening of Cuban color and culture through literature, the fluidity of music and dance clearly demonstrated the inherent slipperiness and instability of racial boundaries. The gradual darkening of the danza, and the danzón, reflects Ortiz’s notion of a “creación mulata,” a notion that would later give rise to discussions of cultural hybridity.

Conclusion

In nineteenth-century Cuba, blanqueamiento was invoked by Cuban intellectuals in order to resolve what they viewed as Cuba’s race problem. Above all, blanqueamiento required the reproductive contribution of the mulata. The mulata could ensure that the emerging Cuban nation would become lighter and lighter over time. This would also require poor Spanish peasants to immigrate to the island and blacks and mulatos to whiten both culturally and racially. However, Cuba’s governing and cultural elite would remain white because whiteness, as a racial construct, was more than just the color of one’s the skin. The elite would perpetuate itself and ensure the unattainability of whiteness for nonwhites through the legal and social control of white women.

Blanqueamiento in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, like mestizaje in the broader Caribbean and Latin American context, was a racially centered nationalist project that encouraged miscegenation. Blanqueamiento,
in both *Cecilia Valdés* and *Carmela*, sought to articulate a national and cultural identity that was distinct from that of Spain while prescribing racial mixing acceptable to the island’s Creole elite. In creating the image of what is today recognized as the iconic sexualized *mulata*, Cecilia Valdés, Villaverde also constructed what is perhaps the novel’s key contribution: a literary model promoting cross-racial relationships for the enactment of *blanqueamiento* along the guidelines that Saco had provided earlier in the nineteenth century. For Villaverde’s *casi blanca mulata* the goal was to reproduce future generations of whitened Cubans, but only in prescribed gender, skin color, and class combinations. While Meza’s Carmela resembles Villaverde’s Cecilia as a symbol of racial integration, Meza’s characterization reflects a more inclusive vision of Cuban society after the abolition of slavery. Although Meza also constructs cross-class and cross-racial relationships that are ultimately doomed to failure, the romance between the Chinese immigrant, Assam, and Carmela speaks to the multiple cross-racial and cross-ethnic possibilities beyond the traditional three-part paradigm of white, *mulato*, and black.

Both *blanqueamiento* and the *danza* require sexual proximity and indicate a cultural move toward hybridity. In fact, the desire to whiten black skin and the gradual darkening of a white musical genre seem to privilege *mulatez*. However, in this case, dance counters the ideological goals of *blanqueamiento*. Saco argued that Africanization posed a grave threat to Cuba’s prospects for independence and for the survival of Cuban culture which he understood to mean solely white and European.46 However, to simply disavow blackness would not solve Cuba’s race problem. Thus, for Saco, miscegenation or the gradual “diminishing” of blackness, in terms of skin color and culture, became the best possible solution.47 In *Cecilia Valdés* and *Carmela*, whitening is gendered through the body of the “*casi blanca mulata*” who is charged with the reproduction of lighter- and lighter-skinned *mulatos*. However, the enactment of *blanqueamiento* also demonstrated the severe limitations of such a project. The performance of music and dance in these novels challenged *blanqueamiento*’s hierarchization by demonstrating the inexactness and fluidity of any racial construct.

**NOTES**

All translations are my own.

2. Cirilo Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1986); Ramón Meza, *Carmela* (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1978). Subsequent references to these editions of the two novels are placed between parentheses in the text.
4. The vast majority of critics locate the birth of the Cuban novel in the late 1830s. However, critics do not agree on which text should be designated as the first Cuban novel. For instance, Julio C. Sánchez cites Francisco Serrano’s *Ricardo de Leiva* (1836) as the first. Antón Arrufat argues that all narratives published before 1839 should be considered *relatos cortos* or nouvelles. He cites Villaverde’s *El guajiro* (1839) and Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s *Francisco* (1839) as the first Cuban novel.

5. The following novels resulted from Delmonte’s Tertulias: Félix Tanco’s *Petrona y Rosalía* (1838), Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s *Francisco, el ingenio, o, Las delicias del Campo* (written in 1839, but not published until 1880), Echeverría’s *Antonelli*, Milanés’s *El conde Alarcos*, Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiografía de un esclavo*, Pedro José Morillas’s *El Ranchador*, and Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés, o, La loma del ángel*. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sub* (1841) is the only literary text where the probability of interracial love between a white woman and a *mulato* is even considered.


10. Ibid., 111.

11. Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour*, 63. Martínez-Alier’s research is based on the number of marriage entries recorded in two parishes outside of Havana during the nineteenth century. She explains that “separate registers were kept for whites and for coloured people, mixed marriages being registered in the latter” (60).

12. Martínez-Alier (60) notes that at least in one of the parishes, Sta. María del Rosario, not one marriage is registered across the color line, out of 366 between 1805 and 1881. During the same period, the Regla parish, shows a total of two interracial marriages out of 260.

13. Martínez-Alier notes that in the first half of the nineteenth century, the prevalent term used to define “absence of infidel ancestry” was “limpieza de sangre” (15). In the second half of that century, the term “impurity of blood,” came to mean “bad race, African origin and slave status” (116).


17. Ibid.


century: Ramón de Palma, Domingo del Monte, Anselmo Suárez y Romero, Manuel de la Cruz, José Martí, Enrique José Varona, Diego Vicente Tejera, Aurelio Mitjans, and Martín Morúa Delgado.


23. Cirilo Villaverde, Cecilia Valdés, 3. (Biblioteca Ayacucho)


27. Ibid., 218.

28. See “Homenaje a Ramón Meza (1861–1961),” Cuba en la UNESCO (Havana) 2, no. 4 (1961). Meza’s entire literary production suffered decades of neglect and gained relevance only after UNESCO dedicated this 1961 issue to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth.

29. See Enrique José Varona’s article, “Críticas a Meza,” republished in Cuba en la UNESCO, 54–81.


31. Meza is specifically referring to Félix Tanco’s Petrona and Rosalía and Villaverde’s Cecilia Valdés.

32. Martínez-Alier, Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth Century Cuba, 76.

33. Ibid., 151.

34. Ibid.


38. Villaverde, Cecilia Valdés, 87.

39. Ibid.

40. For a discussion of the consumption patterns of an emerging black and mulatto middle class in the last decades of the nineteenth century, see Reynaldo González, Contradanzas y latigazos (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1992).

41. José Miguel Macías, Diccionario cubano, etimológico, crítico, razonado y comprensivo (1888), 451.

42. Ibid.


44. Ibid.

45. Macías, Diccionario cubano, 451.

46. Saco, “Carta de un amigo suyo,” 203.

47. Ibid., 203.