

## PARODY, INTERTEXTUALITY AND LITERARY HISTORY IN REINALDO ARENAS' *LA LOMA DEL ÁNGEL*

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Through parody and intertextuality, Reinaldo Arenas addresses the history of *literary* depictions of slavery in the Caribbean in *La loma del ángel* rather than challenging the adequacy of the historical record.<sup>1</sup> Arenas takes the subtitle of what is generally considered as “the most important novel written in nineteenth-century Cuba,” Cirilo Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés*, as the title of his own text; by invoking the work of his predecessor, Arenas writes himself into the very literary tradition he seeks to revise.<sup>2</sup> By acknowledging his debt to Villaverde as a nineteenth century forefather, Arenas constructs a literary genealogy and also suggests the context in which the two novels should be read. *La loma del ángel* plays with the echoes that result from such intertextuality to highlight the profound artificiality of any contemporary work of fiction that seeks to speak for formerly marginalized groups such as slaves and their descendants who were left out of the pages of “official” historiography. Although Arenas finds inspiration in previous novels about slavery, in his postmodern text, the ‘peculiar institution’ serves more as a literary trope than as a historical reality.

By providing a literary and historical context in which to understand *La loma del ángel*, Arenas’s allusion to Villaverde’s work constitutes a brief Caribbean literary history. Linda Hutcheon suggests in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, that literary history as it is currently practiced, “is not an attempt to preserve and transmit a canon or a tradition of thought; it bears a problematic and questioning relation

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<sup>1</sup> Reinaldo Arenas, *La loma del ángel* (Barcelona: Dador, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> William Luis, *Literary Bond: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990). 100.

to both history and literary criticism.”<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon argues that after French thinker Michel Foucault “we are no longer to deal, therefore, with either ‘tradition’ or ‘the individual talent,’ as Eliot would have us do” (97). While Foucault’s criticism of discourses and master narratives may have changed the nature of literary history in countries with an already established literary tradition and a canon of literary works, the Caribbean islands for the most part lack such an established and recognized body of literary works they can legitimately call their own. Brian McHale recuperates Eliot for postmodernism by seeing his influence in the work of French structuralists. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, he reads Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” as allowing for an intertextual zone or space.

It has become commonplace since Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and even more so since French structuralists’ work on intertextuality, to picture literature as a field, or better, a network whose nodes are the actual texts of literature. By this account, an intertextual space is constituted whenever we recognize the relations among two or more texts, or between specific texts and larger categories such as genre, school, period.<sup>4</sup>

*La loma del ángel* constitutes just such a “network” of literary texts by invoking the work of its literary predecessor instead of merely alluding to or reproducing specific historical events. I read the intertextual space created by this novel as a commentary upon and recognition of a tradition of Caribbean literature. Although it acknowledges its place within this tradition, Arenas clearly views himself as an individual talent with stature enough to challenge the assumptions implicit in the work of his predecessors. *La loma del ángel* constitutes Arenas’s personal revision of the tradition; rather than parodying Cuba’s most famous abolitionist novel *Cecilia Valdés, o la loma del ángel*, Arenas undertakes the task of writing *Cecilia Valdés* as he would have written it himself. He addresses the reader directly in the prologue: “Así pues no presento al lector la novela que escribió Cirilo Villaverde (lo cual obviamente es innecesario), sino aquella que yo hubiese escrito en su lugar.” This postmodern authorial claim recalls Borges’s Pierre Menard, who wrote *Don Quijote* word for word, a feat all the more remarkable, the narrator claims, precisely because Menard was writing so much later than Cervantes. Where Borges insists on the exact correspondence between an original text

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988). 91.

<sup>4</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1987). 56-57.

and its later reproduction, Arenas delights in drawing a distinction between his work and Villaverde's.

Although his novel is considerably shorter than its nineteenth century namesake, Arenas claims that *La loma del ángel* is not a summary of *Cecilia Valdés*. He acknowledges being influenced by “ciertas ideas generales, ciertas anécdotas, ciertas metáforas, dando luego rienda suelta a la imaginación.” Thus, Arenas finds in Villaverde's novel the inspiration for his own work of fiction. He does not deny that *La loma del ángel* parodies *Cecilia Valdés* even though Arenas insists in this preface that his novel is an imaginative work in its own right and not merely a criticism of Villaverde's text.

En cuanto a la literatura como escritura o parodia, es una actividad tan antigua que se remonta casi al nacimiento de la propia literatura (o por lo menos al nacimiento de su resplandor). Baste decir que eso fue lo que hicieron Esquilo, Sófocles y Eurípides en la antigüedad y luego Shakespeare y Racine, para sólo mencionar a los autores más ilustres de todos los tiempos. La ostentación de tramas originales —ya lo dijo brillantemente Jorge Luis Borges— es una falacia reciente. Así lo comprendieron Alfonso Reyes con su *Ifigenia cruel*, Virgilio Piñera con su *Electra* Garrigó y hasta Mario Vargas Llosa en *La guerra del fin del mundo*.

De manera que con antecedentes tan ilustres ni aun una torpeza tan desmesurada como la mía necesita mayor justificación (10).

In his defense of parody as legitimate literary genre, Arenas constructs a genealogy of “illustrious antecedents” for himself and his work that juxtaposes “the most illustrious authors of all time,” all western icons, with four Latin American writers of varying renown: the internationally acclaimed Borges and Vargas Llosa, and the lesser known Alfonso Reyes and Virgilio Piñera. Unlike Reyes and Piñera, however, whose work parodies the ancient Greeks, Reinaldo Arenas set his sights on a Cuban icon.

Whereas Villaverde's novel addresses and portrays slavery as a contemporary evil, *La loma del ángel* depicts both slavery and the discourse of abolition as literary constructs and criticizes the way writers impose their own sensibilities upon the subject matter of their text. Arenas “signals” the difference between his work and Villaverde's by downplaying most of the abolitionist didacticism while also exaggerating what particularly interests him, the incestuous relationships at all levels of society. Just as in the preface to his novel Arenas argues that Western writers' use of parody has influenced Latin American and Caribbean literature, J. Michael Dash contends that parody is a popular genre in Caribbean letters and argues that:

This parodic vein in Caribbean writing ... calls language and the literary act into question and reduces everything to matter. This view of the world as absolutely material, absolutely carnal, undercuts any idealistic dualism separating the literary from the real, consciousness from matter, mind from body. It is not surprising that this tradition should result in a rejuvenation of language, making it more immediate and sensory.<sup>5</sup>

*La loma del ángel*'s parody makes *language* "more immediate and sensory," but it also renders *narrative* more abstract. The more language describes "carnal" or "material" events in these novels, the more fantastic the narrative becomes, excluding any reference to the world (be it novelistic or extradiegetic) at large. Thus, *La loma del ángel* "call[s] the literary act into question" as a matter of form; Arenas's novel is primarily a literary exercise in metafiction.

### Historiographic Metafiction

Due to its emphasis on intertextuality and its reexamination of the past genres like abolitionist novels and novels about slavery, *La loma del ángel* can best be described as "historiographic metafiction," a genre Linda Hutcheon outlines in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*:

In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative—be it in literature, history, or theory—that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past (5).

Rather than criticizing historiography for promoting some ideologies while discounting or effacing those of more marginal groups, *La loma del ángel* emphasizes its own status as a literary construct by including overtly metafictional components. *La loma del ángel* challenges the characterization of slaves in both recent and nineteenth century abolitionist novels.

Hutcheon draws a parallel between fiction and the writing of history, claiming that "The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers: it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or

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<sup>5</sup> J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998).

historical” (125). Although she discounts Eliot’s influence after Foucault, Hutcheon very much echoes “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in her insistence of the “presence of the past,” which the poet calls “the historical sense.” However, although the past is present in *La loma del ángel* through its references to earlier texts, the historical past of slavery to which the originals refer is not really the novel’s concern. The novel presents an anachronistic world view: Arenas openly imposes a late twentieth century perspective onto a purportedly historical tale. Hutcheon argues that “what postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ever being able to *know* the ‘ultimate objects’ of the past” and it is because Arenas is profoundly aware of his inability to empathize with the lot of slaves one hundred years after their emancipation that he does not attempt a realistic narrative.

Arenas deploys a narrative strategy of continuous interruption in this novel. His brief note “sobre la obra” is the first of many direct appeals to the reader; it becomes particularly important” because *La loma del ángel* features a character named Reinaldo Arenas who both is and is not the implied author of the text as well as the fictional counterparts of earlier Cuban writers on the slavery theme, such as Lydia Carrera and even Cirilo Villaverde himself. McHale uses Umberto Eco’s concept of “transworld identity” to describe the movement “between characters in their projected worlds and real-world historical figures.”<sup>6</sup> Arenas deploys this device repeatedly in *La loma del ángel* by including other “borrowed” historical figures such as Cirilo Villaverde, the author of *Cecilia Valdés*, and the painter Goya, to name a few.<sup>7</sup> At other times, characters comment on their status within the novel as a fictional text. Nemesia Pimienta, the lovelorn black female companion of the heroine, Cecilia Valdés, is a case in point. Since she is a minor character whose woes occupy a relatively small portion of the narration, the third person omniscient narrator reveals Nemesia’s thoughts about her dependence on the author:

Y en cuanto a su discurso (su queja) de un momento a otro tendría que ponerle fin, pues ni al autor de la novela en la cual era ella una insignificante pieza le interesaba su tragedia.

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<sup>6</sup> McHale 16. Umberto Eco elaborates this concept in “Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text,” *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1979). 200-266.

<sup>7</sup> See William Luis, “Present and Future Antislavery Narratives: Reinaldo Arenas’s *Graveyard of the Angels*” in *Literary Bondage* for a more detailed discussion of the many instances of “transworld identity” or intertextual borrowing of characters or historical figures in Arenas’ novel.

Más bien Nemesis Pimienta le era indiferente y (como el resto) sólo la utilizaba. Ni siquiera un amor como el suyo, tan vasto y desesperado como su propia vida, ocupaban un lugar (aunque fuese pequeño) en la pretenciosa serie de capítulos titulados precisamente Del Amor que el susodicho escritor había redactado. Y a pesar de ello, su amor, protestaba Nemesis, era mucho más grande que el de todos los demás personajes reunidos. ¡Muchísimo más! ... Pero ya ella veía cómo el desalmado autor de la obra se le acercaba amenazante. No, no podía ni siquiera agregar una palabra más; a nadie le podría seguir contando su tragedia, su amor, su desamor. No sería ni siquiera un grito al final de un capítulo. Nada. De un momento a otro le taparían la boca y los demás ni cuenta se darían de que ella había sido vilmente amordazada, liquidada. Y toda su pasión, todo su furor, toda su ternura habrán quedado en ... (50).

I pause on this long passage because of its ambiguity; Nemesis's complaint against the "desalmado autor de la obra" could conceivably refer *either* to Villaverde or to Arenas, or even to both of them simultaneously. Since this segment is in the third person, it could be read as Arenas' condemnation of Villaverde's treatment of his minor characters. Then again, it could be Arenas' criticism of his own style, or mere narrative play. Whatever the referent, the "author" becomes a sinister presence within his own text when Nemesis compares the act of narration to physical violence, especially given the context of slavery.

By equating the white male writer with the white slave master, Arenas criticizes not only the cruel mistreatment of the slaves that took place in Cuba during the nineteenth century, but also the patronizing abolitionist rhetoric that sought to correct this injustice. Villaverde is as guilty of not treating his black subjects fairly, in the narrator's view, as the Spaniards were for continuing to safeguard the prosperity of the slave economy. Although admittedly a rewriting of a nineteenth century novel, *La loma del ángel* stands on its own as an independent text reflecting the ideologies of the time of its production and not attempting to recreate the past in any serious way. Thus, I take issue with William Luis's claim in *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* that:

Following *Cecilia Valdés*, *Graveyard of the Angels* describes life in nineteenth-century Cuba and reproduces characters and scenes which have become familiar in Villaverde's novel. In so doing, he reaffirms Villaverde's position regarding the theme of slavery and joins him in denouncing a system of oppression which excludes blacks from the mainstream of society (240).

*La loma del ángel* does not "describe" but rather parody "life in nineteenth-century Cuba." For Arenas to join Villaverde in denouncing slavery would be anachronistic. Nemesis's chapter illustrates the

intrusion of contemporary attitudes and mores into what claims to be a fictional historical narrative; it is neither a denouncement of racial discrimination nor a criticism of slavery. Instead, Arenas's portrayal of the all-controlling author could be read as a commentary on Cuba's tradition of repressive government, especially since both Cirilo Villaverde and Arenas himself had to flee the island to escape political persecution.

Minor characters are not the only ones at the mercy of the implied author in this novel. Cirilo Villaverde, the author of *Cecilia Valdés*, shows up as a character in an eponymous chapter. Unlike poor Nemesia, who succumbs to the power of the implied author, the matriarch doña Rosa runs Villaverde out of town, where he had been teaching local children how to read since he believed there was a lack of Cuban readers for his work and attributed this fact to the low rate of literacy on the island. Through a clever use of dialogue, the implied author leaves it up to the reader to decide if Villaverde lives or dies.

—Me pregunto —dijo entonces doña Rosa— si al fin habrá muerto ese imbécil [Cirilo Villaverde].

—¡Ah! —respondió don Cándido tomando galantemente una de las regordetas manos de su esposa—. Eso queda para el curioso lector... (124)

Thus, Arenas reverses the power dynamics of the earlier instance of metafiction. Here, the reader is in a position to act violently by killing off the author in his or her imagination, whereas in Nemesia's chapter, she rages against the implied author's attempt to forcibly silence her.

By calling the authorial position into question in *La loma del ángel*, Arenas emphasizes his double role as both a reader of the antislavery works of the past and a writer defined by the trends of his day, namely, postmodernism. Instead of refusing to judge any one reading of a text above another, the overtly explicit instances of metafiction in this novel call attention to the fact that *La loma del ángel* is itself a reading of and commentary upon Villaverde's text. The narrator therefore emerges as a figure closer to the reader than to the two implied authors in the novel—Arenas and Villaverde.

## Slavery

Reinaldo Arenas's *La loma del ángel* parodies the genres of abolitionist novels as well as traditional historical novels about

slavery. Although it briefly alludes to the Middle Passage, the novel does not recreate any specific historical event. By purposefully drawing slave characters that do not rise above the status of types, Arenas criticizes the racist and dehumanizing rhetoric that the European powers used to justify their involvement in the slave trade. *La loma del ángel* avoids describing life in bondage with any degree of verisimilitude. Rather than creating yet another sympathetic or heroic slave character, Arenas readily admits his inability to imagine what it must have been like to live and work as a slave in the Caribbean.

Even when discussing slavery and presenting slave characters, Arenas insists on the textual nature of our knowledge of the past. In the nineteenth century, slavery itself was hotly debated and discussed through competing discourses: both abolitionist or antislavery novels, such as *Cecilia Valdés*, as well as pro-slavery tracts sought to sway public opinion. By parodying this text through stereotypical or widely exaggerated descriptions of slaves and of life in bondage, *La loma del ángel* pokes fun at the ways both abolitionists and slave owners manipulated language to fit their own particular agenda. Since the discourse of slavery did not consider slaves to be human beings, Arenas's caricatures of slaves imply that realistic or verisimilar characters in contemporary historical novels about slavery are an anachronistic conceit which reflects only current attitudes about self-determination and fractured subjectivity as well as our interpretation of slave narratives. Abolitionist novels, according to this logic, impose their notions of either white subjectivity, most evident in the preference for octaroon damsels in distress, or their stereotypes of noble savages, as in the slaves descended from African kings, upon the slave characters so as to elicit the greatest possible sympathy for bondspeople and condemnation of the system of slavery.

Absent from this consideration, of course, is a parody of slaves' own representation of their experiences. Unlike was the case in the United States and even in some of the Anglophone islands, the Hispanophone Caribbean produced only one slave narrative, Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo*; it was first published in its English translation in Great Britain.<sup>8</sup> In his reading of American slave narratives, Leonard Cassuto points to the paradox facing slave narrators as they write about their experiences: having achieved their freedom and wishing to persuade others of the evils of

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<sup>8</sup> Juan Francisco Manzano, *Autobiografía de un esclavo*, ed. Ivan A. Schulman, trans. Evelyn Picon Garfield (1840; Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996).

slavery, they must write about something their audience can't imagine—being treated as things. In *The Inhuman Race*, Cassuto explains how the slave narrators constructed their discourse of complete disenfranchisement.

it might be possible to describe one's own objectification from memory, but the experience has to be retrospective, for to be objectified in one's own mind would necessarily mean losing one's own consciousness. By subjecting themselves to objectification within their narratives, slave narrators use rhetorical artifice to make their readers feel what they cannot say.<sup>9</sup>

The paradox Cassuto discusses comes about because slaves wrote their narratives only after they secured their own freedom while they were still living in bondage. In writing about their past experiences, the slave narrators also impose their current cultural identity as people—which was only acknowledged to any degree in the North—upon their previous life as slaves. These narrators also speak *for* others who are still slaves and therefore are treated like objects. If even slave narratives have to reconstruct the experience of slavery in retrospect, then any attempt to assign or imagine a complex subjectivity to slave characters in fiction is equally artificial.

Arenas confronts the perceived lack of interest on the part of the reading audience in the genre of antislavery or abolitionist literature early in their texts. He assures the reader that although *Cecilia Valdés* is considered one of the best examples of abolitionist literature it, and presumably his own revision, “en realidad es mucho más que eso” [“it is really much more than that”] (9). The parody of this genre works in three different levels in *La loma del ángel*: in the references to the Middle Passage, in the references to punishment and in the rhetorical strategies for dehumanizing the slaves. Arenas's novel handles the first of these levels by mentioning the Middle Passage not from the point of view of the slaves who went through it, but rather from the perspective of the speculators whose money made the journeys possible after the British had outlawed the slave trade. Cándido Gamboa, the father of both Cecilia Valdés and her lover, Leonardo, complains about having to bribe Spanish officials when the British military, enforcing the end of the slave trade, stops his boats full of contraband Africans. Gamboa has made his fortune from financing slaving expeditions as well as running a sugar plantation:

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<sup>9</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997). 124.

He sido albañil y carpintero, he vendido maderas y tejas, y sobre todo, he arriesgado mi fortuna, y a veces hasta el pellejo, trayendo sacos de carbón —esto es, negros del África— y vendiéndolos aquí a los señores de los ingenios, con lo que he contribuido al desarrollo de esta isla y gente malagradecida. Es cierto que mi matrimonio con Rosa también me ayudó mucho, ella tenía su fortuna. Pero yo la he triplicado con mi trabajo ... Yo tengo un ingenio, un cafetal, un barracón lleno de negros bozales (20).

A Spaniard, Gamboa sees himself above both the slaves in which he traffics as well as the Cubans amongst whom he lives. But, given his humble origins, it was his wife Rosa who had a fortune and himself who had to make a living as a bricklayer and carpenter, Gamboa considers his involvement in the slave trade not as idle speculation, but as part of his work.

Rather than resorting to the supernatural in his discussion of the punishment of slaves, the second narrative level, Reinaldo Arenas uses exaggeration and the absurd to voice his criticism. Among the many senseless acts of violence the Gamboa family perpetrates upon their black servants, the most flagrant disregard for life takes place each morning when Leonardo wakes up. The young man treats slaves as disposable commodities by killing at least one a day when they come to wake up Leonardo.

En efecto, en varias ocasiones el señorito había dado muerte con lo primero que tenía de la mano a algunos de los esclavos por haberlo despertado, aunque la orden viniese, como siempre, de don Cándido.

—No pienses que eso es una gracia —replicó precisamente don Cándido a doña Rosa, visiblemente contrariado—. De esa manera he perdido ya a varios de mis mejores criados. Y sabrán ustedes —dijo ahora dirigiéndose a don Pedro e Isabel— que los ingleses, esas bestias, cada día están más empecinados en que no desembarquemos ningún saco de carbón de África. (65-66)

This passage points to the contempt with which Europeans regarded the very people whom they forced to assist them in their most intimate details. Most slaves experienced their share of punishment and humiliation, though they were not murdered very often. At the same time, the quote also attests to the growing value of creole slaves, since the African slave trade had been banned. Ironically, Gamboa's word choice exemplifies the emptiness of the rhetoric of racial superiority which the European powers used to justify their use of slave labor. The Spaniard designates his fellow Europeans, the British, by means of an animal metaphor, comparing them to beasts, "bestias", but he reserves the mineral metaphor, coal bags or "saco[s] de carbón," for the slaves, thereby implying that he views Africans as natural resources, not as sentient beings.

The third way through which the narrator parodies the rhetoric of slaves' inhumanity is by denying the individuality of the slave characters. The narrator of *La loma del ángel* briefly ponders upon the popularity of "Dolores" as a first name for slaves in general even as he himself chooses the same appellation for his character:

Dolores, Dolores... ¿Por qué tantos negros, lo mismo hombres que mujeres, se llamaban Dolores? Quizás, seguramente, porque como esclavos no tenían otra manera de publicar su dolor; un dolor sin sexo y tan largo como sus propias vidas, un dolor que duraría tanto como su propio nombre. Dolores, dolores, al ponerle ese nombre a sus hijos, los padres ya les anticipaban, con una fatídica y certera premonición, el significado de toda la existencia, dolores, dolores ... y Dolores era también su nombre, nombre sin duda bien escogido, porque dolores había sido y era su historia. (83)

Though this passage seems to indicate a critique against the system of slavery, it is mostly a rumination on the nature of the sign and the signifier. The narrator's analysis of the slaves' choice of first names is really a commentary upon naming as "publishing" or making public both a message and an identity. Naming their children "Dolores," the narrator argues, was slaves' only means of publically commenting on the ill treatment they constantly received: "porque como esclavos no tenían otra manera de publicar su dolor." This act of naming might be read as a subversive way of resisting authority but it also implies that slaves regarded their children as texts to be deciphered by each other and perhaps by sympathetic whites. The narrator implies that slaves also regarded themselves as characters in an overdetermined drama of slavery. But by prefacing the chapter entitled "Dolores Santa Cruz" with this meditation on the popularity of the first name "Dolores," Arenas likens himself in the role of author to the slave parents who anticipate a long and arduous life ahead for their children as "creations."

By using parody and metafiction to emphasize the textual nature of our knowledge of the past, Arenas also criticizes revisionist attempts to speak for the oppressed. *La loma del ángel* tries to find new ways of discussing slavery without the constraints of either historiography or traditional ways of fictionalizing the past. As a novel, *La loma del ángel* presents the saga not of the individual slave who breaks free from his or her chains but rather of the narrator who struggles to reconcile the different readings of history.

## Lo real maravilloso or Postmodern exaggeration?

*La loma del ángel* parodies *lo real maravilloso* and its tendency to celebrate the supernatural as an inherent feature of the local landscape. Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier first theorized about *lo real maravilloso* in the preface to one of his own historical novels about slavery, *El reino de este mundo*.<sup>10</sup> Carpentier's historical novel presented voodoo as a serious religious practice and featured lycanthropy as an example of the slaves' faith in "the marvelous in the real." Arenas's novel, on the contrary, is a product of a secular age: none of the characters in either text actually believe in the existence of either a deity or an afterlife. The supernatural elements of *La loma del ángel* do not so much blur the boundary between the real and the fantastic as they emphasize their own impossibility and status as literary constructs to criticize other writers' tendencies to celebrate the exotic nature of the Caribbean landscape. In their narrative, Arenas exaggerates ordinary events to such a degree that they acquire absurd proportions, in part to criticize the self-exoticism of *lo real maravilloso*. Hyperbole emphasizes the un-naturalness of events being described, such as the gluttonous plantation owners whose bodies become as big as spheres, roll out of the house, and harden into boulders in *La loma del ángel*. The reader has no expectation that these events could really take place, and therefore in reading about them is only reminded of the very fact that he or she is reading a work of fiction.

This tendency towards exaggeration might suggest a closer correspondence with the genre of magical realism, as practiced by Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, a literary style not necessarily dependent on the landscape of specific Caribbean countries. Jean-Pierre Durix contends, however, that although "Magic realists' are clearly sophisticated in the use they make of metafiction, intertextual references, an interweaving of the 'realistic' and 'fantastic modes,'" the novels they write "have a strong realistic basis" (146). Because *La loma del ángel* does not attempt realism at all it cannot be classified as magical realism. Arenas's and Chamoiseau's use of excess and hyperbole, then, insists on the texts' artificiality in order to force the reader not to suspend disbelief. Rather than suggesting that truth resides in any kind of text, these postmodern novels about the past demand that their readers be aware of how meaning is made through the convergence of the author's act of writing and the reader's own reading acts and interpretation.

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<sup>10</sup> See Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Santiago, Chile: Orbe, 1972).

The title of Arenas's novel refers at once to a geographic landmark (la loma/the hill) as well as to the supernatural "ángel." Instead of making the reader "hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of events described," as Tzvetzan Todorov argues the fantastic does, *La loma del ángel* presents absurd descriptions of excess.<sup>11</sup> The hill of the novel's title is not a natural outcrop of rock, as the reader might suppose, but rather a man-made phenomenon consisting of an ever growing number of corpses buried underneath the church building which lift it almost to the clouds. In another instance, after witnessing how two slaves who fell inside the bowels of a steam machine don Gamboa purchased to aid in sugar production were forcefully ejected, 2,500 other slaves willingly throw themselves into the fiery furnace in the mistaken belief that it would throw them back to Africa. The scale of the numbers involved in both of these examples are ludicrous, and their status as symbols is obvious: the target of criticism is the maltreatment of the slaves in the sugar plantations which resulted in high mortality rates. Exaggeration here functions in the same way didactic asides worked in either abolitionist novels or historical novels about the past: rather than discuss at length the Catholic Church's complicity in the slave trade and the plantation owners' view of their slaves as automatons, the narrator uses hyperbole to create humor about situations few would defend. Since slavery is no longer practiced in the Caribbean, Arenas has no urgent need to convince readers that it is a bad thing. In contrast, Villaverde's goal in writing *Cecilia Valdés* was to denounce slavery as evil and convince his fellow Cubans to outlaw it. This discrepancy shows that regardless of Arenas's desire to write "the novel I would have written if I were in his place," *La loma del ángel* and *Cecilia Valdés* are each the product of their respective times.

Both the dangers of the forest and the proliferation of corpses, slaves, etc., take place only within the parameters of the novel as a text. Exaggeration forces the reader to reconsider the ways in which books or stories have shaped his or her understanding of the world. Instead of looking to the Caribbean islands themselves as the source of narrative magic, Arenas constructs a literary history of Caribbean fiction about slavery and challenge the reader to examine the assumptions about the truth value of written texts in general before reading the canon these authors name. Through parody and intertextuality, Arenas suggests that literary depictions of the past

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<sup>11</sup> Tzvetzan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (1970; Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975). 25.

reflect most accurately our current reading practices and attitudes about reality in general. Arenas' use of the theme of slavery demonstrates their awareness of the presence of the past in the present, and their 'historical sense' compels them to situate their own work, *La loma del ángel* in the context of previous literary depictions of life in bondage.

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