

The Strange Case of Narciso: Cirilo Villaverde's Politics

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ABSTRACT

The political views and actions of Cirilo Villaverde have received short shrift in contemporary scholarship. The sketchiness has led to confusion about Villaverde's politics. While much critical work has been devoted to the racial conundrum in *Cecilia Valdés*, to a large measure it has omitted analysis of the author's views on the wider issue of Cuba's political fate. Notwithstanding Villaverde's active involvement as a political actor, the ideas vehemently expressed in his political writings, he has been often identified, without great scrutiny to his writings, as an *anexionista*, in large part due to his association with Narciso López. Reading Villaverde's writings, as well as those of other Cuban political actors of the time, makes the historical confusion that surrounds López and Villaverde's political beliefs perplexing. Villaverde to the last defended his own belief in Cuban independence, and several times wrote in defense of López. Cubans and Americans have debated López's intentions and Villaverde's politics, either ignoring or disregarding original sources such as Villaverde's published statements that are deemed unreliable, pointedly when they contradict or create fissures in the American historical grand narrative.

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RESUMEN

Las opiniones y las actividades políticas de Cirilo Villaverde han recibido poca atención crítica. La parquedad o falta de atención crítica ha creado confusión acerca de cuáles eran sus posiciones políticas, caso curioso dado que Villaverde participó de manera activa en la política. Mientras que la crítica se ha concentrado casi con exclusividad en la política racial en su novela emblemática, *Cecilia Valdés*, ha dejado a un lado sus otros escritos periodísticos y novelas que pudieran esclarecer sus ideas sobre la situación política cubana en el siglo diecinueve. Debido a su colaboración política con el general Narciso López, se le ha atribuido a Villaverde el haber sido partidario del anexionismo, aunque luego se sostenga de manera confusa un cambio de opinión hacia el final de su vida. Cuando se analizan los textos de Villaverde y otros actores políticos de la época, causa perplejidad la confusión. Villaverde sostuvo por escrito a lo largo de toda su vida que siempre había estado en favor de la independencia cubana y negó con igual tenacidad el haber favorecido alguna vez el anexionismo. Sostuvo lo mismo de López. Es curiosa la omisión de estas fuentes originales, que se excluyen o se descartan como poco confiables, más aún cuando son testimonios directos que contradicen o crean fisuras en la narrativa histórica norteamericana.

Palabras clave: Cirilo Villaverde, Cuba, política, Narciso López, anexionismo, independencia, filibuster, ideología, siglo XIX, Cuba, Estados Unidos, Romanticismo, historia, memoria

The political views and actions of Cirilo Villaverde, arguably the most important Cuban novelist of the nineteenth century, have received short shrift in contemporary scholarship. Villaverde's opinions about Cuba's political fate are more often than not attributed to him as an afterthought, rather than analyzed or much less contextualized. The sketchiness that has led to confusion is a curious oversight since he was a writer who engaged –at times intensely– in politics. His political activism, as well as the rest of his fiction and writings, is clearly overshadowed by his iconic novel *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel*, a literary text that in fact addressed directly crucial political, and social issues of his time.

Undoubtedly, in the final version of this novel published in New York, Villaverde delved incisively into the inhumanity of the system of slavery. However, in his other works of fiction, and in his articles published in scattered newspapers and pamphlets he addressed also the social tensions, and the political concerns within Cuban society. Villaverde broached in many of his writings the theme of the strains that surged within the multiracial and immigrant society that Cuba –and especially Havana– had become in the nineteenth century. Those racial and national tensions find their way into the plots of his other shorter novels. The resentment felt by the Indian Guamá for her socially imposed inferiority fuels the tragic outcome in the historical novel *El Penitente*. The inability to adapt to his new Cuban surroundings defines Simón, the Spanish immigrant who rejects the new social habits he encounters in Havana, different from those of the Spanish village of his origins in *La joven de la flecha de oro*. While much critical work has been devoted to the racial conundrum in *Cecilia Valdés*, to a large measure it has omitted not only its relation to the rest of his work but also to the author's views on the wider issue of Cuba's political situation.

While still in Cuba, Villaverde was active in politics. Apprehended in 1848 for his involvement in a separatist movement, he was charged with treason, and was held in jail incommunicado. He received the death penalty, a sentence that was later commuted.¹ Just before the High Court was to debate his ultimate fate, he escaped from prison, sailing to the United States. After landing, the *Democratic Review* published a letter Cirilo Villaverde sent from Savannah, Georgia. In the April 19, 1849, letter addressed to Miguel Teúrbe Tolón, he wrote:

At last I am resting under the wings of the American Eagle.

It may be that you are already apprised of my miraculous escape from the prison of Havana, where, as a man guilty of high treason, and accused of a capital crime by the District Attorney [Fiscal] I was lately watched with the greatest diligence. I see myself free, in the land of liberty; and I can hardly believe what I see and touch. (Villaverde 1840: 201)

Notwithstanding Villaverde's active involvement as a political actor, the ideas vehemently expressed in his political writings, as well as his fiction that represented the social tensions within the burgeoning national consciousness, he has been often identified, casually without great scrutiny to his writings, as an “anexionista,” i.e., someone who favored Cuba's incorporation to the United States. His political associations during his prolonged American exile made his avowals of liberty ambiguous to some. While mostly dismissed as having favored early in his life Cuba's annexation to the United

States –a political thought that had prominent proponents both in Cuba and the United States who favored this political outcome– Villaverde is perceived vaguely as having then changed his views, favoring political independence later in life. The issue of Villaverde’s political ideas is further confused due –and in fact intimately tied– to his close collaboration with Narciso López. Villaverde was López’s personal secretary “in arms” for three years in the United States, after meeting him previously in Havana. The Venezuelan-born general organized several failed attempts to end Spain’s control over Cuba. Before he arrived in the United States, López had tried to lead a revolt while still in Cuba. As a result he had to flee the Island. Of the four expeditions he undertook from the United States, the American government stopped two. He managed to sail twice, leading expeditions to Cuba, first in 1850, and then again in 1851. The last one cost him his life. The Spaniards executed him September 1, 1851, by *garrote*, stripping him of all his military honors.²

There are a few exceptions to the critical tendency to associate the political ideology of López and Villaverde, frequent in both Cuban and American studies. Imeldo Álvarez García reached the conclusion that, taking into account the Cuban novelist’s actions, and works of fiction it was impossible to conflate Villaverde’s ideology with that of the “ambitious Venezuelan” (317).³ Álvarez García, Jorge and Isabel Castellanos tend to disassociate Villaverde’s ideology from that of López, whom they, nevertheless, along with most American scholarship, deride as a “filibustero,” doubting his professed intention of seeking political freedom, which they considered was just a subversive ploy to annex Cuba to the United States.⁴ In American scholarship, the term “filibuster” came to mean a foreigner who carried out an illegal invasion of another country in times of peace mostly for economic interests (Quisenberry 7). Not only was it associated with unlawful adventurism, but also it became almost synonymous with piracy. This followed the Spaniards’ use of “filibusteros” that was meant as an insult to the Cubans who favored annexation to the United States.⁵ The other nefarious interpretation cast over López’s expeditions usually links him to the American and Cuban political actors who promoted Cuba’s annexation in order to continue the system of slavery. Adding Cuba as a state would insure the continuation of slavery in the Island while it would also increase the slave-owning states’ power in the United States Congress.⁶ Furthermore, in American scholarship, Narciso López’s expeditions are just another chapter in the history of the wars waged during the nineteenth century that resulted in American territorial expansion.⁷

If Villaverde’s supposed early annexationism is deduced mostly from his association with López, so too is that of the former Spanish general. López was

acquainted with Americans who actively promoted joining Cuba to the American Union. Many such politicians and journalists contributed to his cause. Among those influential journalists acquainted with López was J. L. O'Sullivan, who coined the term “Manifest Destiny.” As editor of the *Democratic Review*, he published extensively on Cuba. In the anonymous publication “General López, the Cuban Patriot,” it is stated that López’s democratic principles were directed at first freeing Cuba from “the abomination of Spanish tyranny, with a view to her entrance to our Union” (16).⁸ Furthermore, the majority of López’s expeditionary force in his first maritime invasion of Cárdenas, Cuba was composed of Southerners.⁹ To American scholars all of these facts constitute a preponderance of proof that López was in fact a proxy for the American slave cause or, at the very least, that he was someone involved in furthering American expansionism.¹⁰ American domestic and foreign interests in the nineteenth century created the framework that has shaped the American historical narrative of López’s expeditions.

Figure 1. Caricature attribute to Cirilo Villaverde



Already from Thomas Jefferson to especially John Quincy Adams, there was a clear acknowledgement of the geostrategic importance of Cuba as the key to securing the safety of the shipping lanes through the Gulf and on to the Atlantic. Adams, who had favored Cuba's incorporation to the American Union, highlighted the American exposure, pointing out the need to insure a friendly government in Cuba to avoid the threat of "maritime wars" that could adversely affect American commercial shipping lanes:

Cuba, almost in sight of our shores, from a multitude of considerations, has become an object of transcendent importance to the commercial and political interests of our Union. Its commanding position, with reference to the Gulf of Mexico and the West India seas; the character of its population; its situation midway between our southern coast and the island of St. Domingo; its safe and spacious harbor the Havana, fronting a long line of our shores destitute of the same advantage; ... give it an importance in the sum of our national interest with which no other foreign country can be compared...¹¹

The López expeditions happened in the background of different American administrations' repeated offers to buy the island of Cuba. The United States government's interest in acquiring Cuba during the Polk administration went so far as to inform the Spanish authorities of one of López's expeditions to Cuba, in fact betraying López to the Spaniards in order, so went the argument, to offer reassurances of their good faith in their dealings with the Spanish government. Although financially bankrupt, Spain consistently rejected American offers to buy the Island, at one point replying they would rather see Cuba sink in the ocean than sell it to the United States (Santovenia 79-80).¹²

Such Numantian rhetoric seems understandable given the mounting rivalry between the United States, Great Britain and France for supremacy in commercial shipping. The tensions are in display in the diplomatic exchanges for the Tripartite Convention, a proposed meeting between the United States, England and France to discuss the fate of Cuba. In the diplomatic dispatches of 1853, the French representative underscored that the "culpable" attempts to separate the colony from Spain -a clear reference to López's military expeditions- could "compromise" the "friendly" relations between the United States and France. Furthermore, the French diplomat threatened that France would capture anyone in the Gulf of Mexico who attempted against Spanish sovereignty over "that important colony." He states explicitly that Cuba's political situation was of as much interest to the "great maritime powers" as to Spain

(Everett 7). Cuba's geographical position gave it control over the access between the two oceans, he pointed out. Not mincing words, he candidly explained that were a maritime power to possess the Island, it would be in a position to control or impede the shipping lane between both oceans (Everett 18). This document underscored how the strategic importance that the Cuban coast and the Havana harbor had for commercial shipping influenced transatlantic political relations. Besides the United States very active trade with the Island, American policy towards Cuba affected its foreign affairs, more so with its main European commercial competitors.¹³

It is evident that Cuba's political fate was not just of interest, but also of importance far beyond its shores since it was caught in the crossfire of the competing commercial and political transatlantic interests of the United States, Great Britain and France. In diplomatic exchanges, the representatives of the three countries state unambiguously that it is in their countries' national interest to maintain Cuba under Spanish rule. In the mid-nineteenth century, Spain represented no commercial threat to these countries, and their support of Spain's possession meant that the shipping lane controlled by the Cuban coast –he key to the Gulf of Mexico that connected both oceans– would be kept open, and not under the control of a commercial competitor. The French diplomat duly noted that both Great Britain and France had extended considerable financial credit to Spain (Everett 18). The European diplomats wilily suggested that Spain's financial straits would lessen were it not forced to maintain such a high level of military presence in Cuba, calculated to have reached a quarter of a million men, an astonishing military presence given the size and population of the Island: scarcely over a million inhabitants.

In turn, Spain's high debt made it all the more difficult for Cubans. The high taxes and tariffs imposed on Cuban trade provided a source of welcomed income to a cash-strapped and nearly bankrupt Spain.¹⁴ The *Life of General Narciso López*, published in 1851 and authored by "Filibustiero" [sic], emphasizes the economic burden placed on the Island by the "despotic and oppressively exacting character of its government, which beggared them to enrich and uphold the power and standing of the mother country, Spain, of which Cuba was the main support, reliance and purveyor" (3). Villaverde's apocryphal caricature satirized the effect that Spain's exorbitant taxes and military corruption had on the Island, drawing Cuba as a cow milked to exhaustion by both abusive functionaries, and misguided Spanish policies towards the Island.

Figure 2. Caricature attributed to Cirilo Villaverde

However, if this political conflict implicated transatlantic commercial interests tangled in competing international aspirations, on the Cuban side internal affairs were no less complicated. The differing and competing interests among *criollos* were just as complex. In nineteenth century Cuba, to declare oneself in favor of separatism from Spain was a high-risk endeavor for a *criollo*, who stood to lose his property, be jailed or exiled. The political solutions that *criollos* espoused during the nineteenth century were many, as they sought to change Cuba's situation —a highly taxed island with no self-governance, but with a military colonial authority riddled with inefficiency and corruption. One of the solutions that gained support in mid-century Cuba among wealthy *criollos* was that of joining the American Union as a state. They would enjoy the benefits of a free society, while preserving their property, and among the sugar plantation owners, their slaves. A Cuban who desired to end Spain's domination over the Island had to contend with international and national forces that conditioned the political situation.

The Cuban historian Herminio Portell Vilá, with access to Villaverde's personal papers, which he bought and consulted, mounted a considerable defense of Narciso López.¹⁵ However, with the exception of some early twentieth century U.S. studies, current scholarship mostly has accepted the official American writings of the time that indicted López's political actions.¹⁶ Against these interpretations, however, there is the testimony of Narciso López in his expeditionary proclamations, and after the López's execution, several testimonies of the Cuban members of the Junta Cubana who refute

the claim of annexation to explain López's motivations. After his death, two of his closest Cuban collaborators rejected in published letters the claims that López had intended to annex Cuba to the United States. In 1849 both Juan Manuel Macías and Villaverde had joined in the creation in New York of the Junta Cubana presided by Narciso López. Macías was one of its *vocales* (members of the executive board), and Villaverde its secretary. Both denied publicly that they or López had ever favored annexation. Their published assertions find a strange corroboration in a private letter sent by Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros. The Cuban writer and political activist was also a founder of the Junta Cubana at a time when he favored Cuba's annexation. In a private letter dated 1859, sent to a friend in Paris, he declared that he had been at the time "un anexionista perdido." While admitting that he had helped López, he emphasizes that he had not been of the same group as López.¹⁷

Betancourt Cisneros's personal confidences subtly give a glimpse into the political compromises that gathered Cubans of different ideologies, but who all sought the island's separation from Spain. Villaverde was involved with both the Junta Cubana as well as the newspaper *La Verdad*. Generally described as seeking Cuba's annexation, on scrutiny of the published articles and personal letters of the different Cuban political activists and men of letters, it becomes evident that these political institutions were more a marriage of convenience with underlying differences of opinions. Macías explained this in an 1875 letter, published in the New York newspaper *La independencia*. Professing his admiration for López, Macías underscores that López had not promoted annexation, but had accepted it in order to unify Cubans, and to gain the cooperation of the members of the Junta. Macías's carefully drawn distinction is an important one because it helps understand the political expediency of López's action. Macías expresses deep emotion towards the former Spanish general when he insists that López had sacrificed everything for Cuba's independence.¹⁸

Villaverde addressed also publicly the doubts, and challenged the accusations made against López, asserting decisively several times during his life that López had always sought Cuba's independence. In his defense of López, Villaverde wrote public letters in which he defended López's actions, while explaining the constraints that limited the political possibilities. When Manuel de la Cruz wrote for *La Habana Elegante*, in 1888, that López did not deserve to be included as a Cuban hero, since he had fought for Cuba's annexation, not for its independence, he received a letter from Villaverde, whom he describes as "Mi respetable y muy querido amigo, el ilustre novelador cubano." Villaverde's letter to De la Cruz evolved into a published article titled "Narciso López." Besides echoing Macías open admiration for López, whom

he calls “el general,” Villaverde also underlined the competing political activities of Cuban exiles in the United States as well as the limitations on the possibilities of action given the political forces at play. While there is in Villaverde’s reply the implicit admission that politics is the art of what is possible, he speaks plainly when describing the circumstances that shaped the events. He alludes to a letter O’Sullivan had published that spoke of López’s dissention from the Junta de La Habana, an early association of wealthy *criollos* who had favored annexation (108). He noted that López had a poor opinion of their “harebrained” (“descabellado”) scheme of employing American volunteers and mercenaries under the command of General Worth to invade the Island.¹⁹ Villaverde insisted that López had never been in favor of annexation, stating unequivocally that the Venezuelan had detested the idea. However, López had had to confront the realities of the political divisions among Cuban exiles and the foreign interests of American politicians in order to start an uprising whose aim –Villaverde insists– was Cuban independence. In his letter to De la Cruz, Villaverde held vehemently that he himself had never supported annexation, and had always advocated Cuba’s political independence. This 1888 letter was not the first or the last time in his life when Villaverde would affirm that both he and López had been always in favor of independence, and had never believed in annexation.

Concerning the criticism López had received for employing “American mercenaries,” Villaverde provided López’s explanation that it had been a tactical decision borne out of necessity. He employed them for the practical reason that there were not enough Cubans in the United States to launch an invasion. Villaverde –who elsewhere in the text expresses his disdain towards mercenary soldiers– added that López had not had a high opinion of the Americans who joined his private armies. Furthermore, to the suspicion cast on López’s expedition because it was composed mostly of Southerners, Villaverde discloses that López had not held those American mercenary soldiers in high esteem, considering them ineffectual *peleles* (puppets).

The criticism López received for using mercenary troops, and maintaining disparate political alliances would seem congruent, and logical in later periods perhaps, but for his time, the objections appear capriciously anachronistic. Since the eighteenth century, the use of mercenary forces had been an accepted practice. Indeed, in the American Revolution there were mercenary soldiers. France contributed with loans and soldiers to the American cause. The Spanish absolute monarchy had also extended loans to the American colonists, debts that largely ended up being unpaid for by the young American republic. Villaverde’s novel *El Penitente* includes as a character the historical figure of the Spanish commander Bernardo de Gálvez, who waged a decisive battle

in the South against the British army. Gálvez's forces "included recruits from Mexico, free blacks, experienced Spanish soldiers in the Louisiana Regiment, volunteers from the American colonies and from Louisiana's German and Acadian communities, and American Indians" (Mitchell). Gálvez –a former captain general of Cuba– broke the British control of the southern flank, an outcome that kept the Mississippi river open to supply American rebels. López had an example closer to home. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the also Venezuelan-born Francisco de Miranda –who had fought alongside the French troops during the American Revolution– raised an army composed of American mercenaries with the aim of invading Venezuela to start an uprising in favor of independence. One of Miranda's associates was the father of J. L. O'Sullivan, who it might seem followed his progenitor's footsteps by involving himself in López's expedition to liberate Cuba.

Villaverde concludes "Narciso López" on an unusually bitter note. In describing Cuba's plight, he condemns implacably both Spanish and American interests. If the Spanish government was a thief devoted to stealing Cuba's wealth, the American government was intent on abducting, raping and dishonoring the country.²⁰ The charge evinces a remarkable change in the perception of the Cuban writer, who had exulted "the land of liberty" when he arrived after escaping Cuba. As a young novelist, while still living on the Island, Villaverde had expressed his admiration for American democracy in his 1843 novel *Dos Amores*, first published in the Havana review *El Faro Industrial*. The character of Teodoro Weber, a Cuban of German descent, kept in his bachelor's room busts of Brutus and Demosthenes. Hanging on the walls of his room were portraits of Washington and Lafayette, along with a map of the United States, since he had been able to acquire an "esmerada educación en la patria de Franklin y Washington" (2013a: 109). All the historical figures mentioned from Ancient Greece and Rome, and the American Revolution are symbols of independent and democratic republics. There is also historical accuracy in the description of Villaverde's fictional character, since in the nineteenth century Cubans who were financially able had begun sending their children to study in the United States.²¹

After his initial youthful celebrations of American freedom, it is startling to find in his later political writings a steely grimness in his assessment of American politics towards Cuba. *La revolución cubana vista desde Nueva York*, written earlier in 1874 during Cuba's Ten Year War (1868-1878) is a political document that records, evaluates, criticizes, and offers practical suggestions on political matters. Villaverde dissects with great acumen the possibilities alongside the many deficiencies of the Cubans' political efforts, noting the deep divisions among Cubans who were separatists.

Villaverde mentions dismissively, as obstacles to Cuban independence, the wealthy Cubans who were ready to settle with Spain, or seek Cuba's annexation to the United States in order to preserve their wealth. Although he foresaw it would be improbable, Villaverde did agree with one of the possibilities that had floated at the time among Cubans: that they might be able to gain independence by buying themselves the Island from Spain, thus avoiding further bloodshed and destruction.

He admonishes the Junta that represented the Cuban Republic in arms in the United States for not issuing bonds to sustain the war effort, as López had done before them. Why did they not send emissaries to the other countries in South America to make the case for Cuban independence? Villaverde answers they are too busy lobbying in the halls of American power (1964: 39). He considered it was a mistake for Cubans to limit their diplomatic efforts to trying to convince Americans to help their cause. Villaverde makes the point that the United States, a "free and strong" country, had always subsumed the wishes of Cubans who had sought their help to their own convenience with "selfishness" and "inhumanity." For Villaverde, if history had taught anything it was that all American administrations had presented a "systematic opposition" to the cause of Cuban independence (1964: 40). For Villaverde, López's experience was a case in point. He states derisively: "*Polk tenía sus miras sobre Cuba, deseaba comprarla, a fin de agregar ese hermoso Estado de esclavos a los demás de la Unión*" (1964: 41). However, Villaverde accepted –bitterly it seems– the hard realities of politics. Polk informed Madrid of López's naval expedition. Was this a betrayal by Polk? No, he answers, in politics that is called a diplomatic ploy ("un ardid"). He ironizes: "What greater guarantee could have the administration in Washington offered Madrid of their justice, impartialness and lack of interest?" (1964: 41) Villaverde does not hesitate to pass judgement on the lack of scruples on the American side, while acknowledging the political mandate of national interest.

Villaverde railed against those Cubans who were pinning their hopes trustingly on the good will of another country, mindlessly forgetting that nations act according to their own self-interest. He shrewdly advised Cubans to widen their diplomatic efforts to gain support for Cuban independence. Making diplomatic overtures to England and France would undermine Spain's European support, while pitting them as commercial competitors of the Americans. Their rivalry could then be used to Cuba's advantage. In his opinion, in deploying their diplomatic effort solely in Washington, Cubans were putting at risk their Island's political fate. They were fools indeed, he thought, those Cubans who forgot that the reason Americans had ventured into risky businesses abroad had been always to further their own best interest, seeking ultimately national

advantage. Villaverde pointed out that the abolition of slavery in the United States had not whetted American appetite for acquiring Cuba. Annexation would be a very negative outcome for Cubans, Villaverde thought. It would change Cuban “personality,” being a threat to their very existence as a people.

Reading Villaverde’s writings, as well as that of other Cuban political actors of the time, makes the historical confusion that surrounds López and Villaverde’s political beliefs perplexing. Cuban and American scholarship has debated López’s intentions either ignoring or disregarding original sources that are deemed unreliable, pointedly when they contradict or create fissures in the American historical grand narrative. One historian, while conceding that López was an “enigmatic” personality, concludes that he was defended only by romantic idealists: “To Cuban zealots he was the romantic and legendary warrior leading the oppressed against Spanish despotism [...] to the Whigs Taylor and Fillmore a diplomatic headache” (Langley 12). It is true that most of Villaverde’s fiction follows the tenets of romanticism, a fact that is also overlooked when the stark realism of some of *Cecilia Valdés*’s episodes are analyzed. Even in his last edition of *El Penitente*, published in New York, Villaverde cites Sir Walter Scott’s *Tales of My Grandfather*, adding the same as a subtitle to his own novel. However, Villaverde’s novels show him to have been an especially astute observer of human nature. Remarkably, his testimony as well as that of Macías –direct witnesses and themselves political actors of the events– has been disregarded when not made suspect. Villaverde to the last defended his own belief in Cuban independence, and several times wrote in defense of Narciso López, whom he identified as a “precursor de la raza de los hombres de Yara” (1891: 109). Two years before his death, he took his pen again in defense of his own personal political beliefs. His health failing, Villaverde wrote a tersely worded letter in 1892, reaffirming once more that he had been “*independiente*” all of his life, refuting for one last time the label that branded him as a former “*anexionista*” (Bellido de Luna 84).

There is a critical corpus concerning the question of the witness of a historical event, or “memory” and history. The argument can be made, as did Todorov, that “our recollection of the past is not as faithful as we might wish” (4).²² However, Villaverde was a privileged witness, and political actor as well as, to this day, one of his country’s most important writers. His historical account of a hazardous and conflict-fraught period along with his personal published testimony about his political beliefs have fallen strangely by the wayside. The interpretations of the events surrounding Narciso López have summarily dismissed, when not just ignored, the words of the Cuban writer. In this dispute, Villaverde seems to be also collateral damage in the ideological

controversy, and competing national interests surrounding Cuba's contentious historical narratives.

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NOTES

¹ Santonvenia points out that Villaverde had been held incommunicado as was customary under Spanish law at the time accused of “infidencia,” that is, treason.

² For a description of his execution, see Filibustiero (27).

³ According to Álvarez García:

Cuando se analizan las actividades de Cirilo Villaverde, hasta el final de su vida; cuando se observan sus hechos a lo largo de las décadas y se estudian sus trabajos políticos y sus ficciones literarias, no es posible arribar a otra convicción: los sentimientos y la filiación ideológica que movieron al novelista no fueron los mismos que mantuviera, entre ceja y ceja el ambicioso venezolano. (317)

⁴ Jorge and Isabel Castellanos were unequivocal:

También puede citarse el caso de Cirilo Villaverde. Miembro de la tertulia de Domingo Delmonte, participa de los criterios abolicionistas del grupo. Y como no era terrateniente, ni abogado de poderosos, sino un escritor pobre, jamás se dejó tentar por las ideas esclavistas. Su novela *Cecilia Valdés*, como veremos en su lugar, es el monumento literario máximo del antiesclavismo cubano. Sin embargo, Villaverde conspira con López, le sirve por años de secretario y luego es redactor jefe de *La Verdad*, órgano del anexionismo exiliado. ¿Hasta dónde coinciden sus ideas con las de un Narciso López, por ejemplo? (39)

Although the authors recognize that Villaverde’s statements refute that he favored at all annexationism, for them his ties to Narciso López cast doubt on his assertions, while they agree that it is evident that Villaverde was a separatist —a neutral term.

⁵ “Los *filibusteros* (tal fue el mote que los españoles aplicaron a los anexionistas [...]). En Cuba, hombres, mujeres, ancianos y niños cubanos, que simpatizaban con la idea anexionista, tenían a gala el ser *filibustero*” stated Juan Bellido de Luna, who was in favor of annexation (45). On the contrary, Matías Montes Huidobro points out in his analysis of the Juan Clemente Zenea’s poem “El filibustero” that the term had come to mean for nineteenth century Cubans those who fought in favor of national independence (164).

⁶ According to one American historian:

To free the islanders from Spanish despotism and to introduce democratic self-government for which the United States was the world’s model were high aims often proclaimed to justify the military expeditions that followed the failure to obtain Cuba by purchase. These motives were in part camouflage to divert attention from the slave-economy character of the annexation movement, but they were also powerful influences in attracting idealistic adherents, for the spirit of freedom was rampant at the time. (Brown 41)

⁷ See Chaffin. Some Cubans in the second half of the nineteenth century such as Miguel Sanguily (1894) expressed distrust of López.

⁸ Although at times attributed to Villaverde, according to Portell Vilá, the author was probably the American journalist J. L. O’Sullivan, who had also family connection to the island, since his sister Mary was married to Cristóbal Madan, a Cuban actively involved in the separatist cause. For O’Sullivan, see Sampson. Lazo points out

that although some bibliographic sources attribute it to Villaverde, he differs in his “style and syntax” (2002: 28). However, Villaverde clearly stated that O’Sullivan was the author of the pamphlet (Villaverde 1891: 107-108).

⁹ A survivor of the last López expedition, the Hungarian-born Louis Schlesinger explained that the inclusion of so many Southerners in the first expedition had concerned López, who then charged Schlesinger to recruit for the second expedition other like-minded revolutionaries among the European émigrés who were then living in the United States (211).

¹⁰ See Chaffin and also Lazo (2005).

¹¹ John Quincy Adams to Hugh Nelson, 28 April 1823, in US Congress, House of Representatives, Island of Cuba, 32nd Congress, 1st Sess., Doc. no. 121 (Washington DC, 1852) 6-7. Quoted in Herminio Portell Vilá, *Historia de Cuba en sus Relaciones con los Estados Unidos y España* (1938), vol. I: 226. For a brief overlook at the political and commercial implications of the geography, see Friedman.

¹² Ramón J. Pidal, Spain’s minister of Foreign Affairs answered in 1848 to Buchanan’s envoy Romulus Saunders “that it was more than any Minister dare, to entertain any such proposition; that he believed such to be the feeling of the country, that sooner than see the Island transferred to any power, they would prefer seeing it sunk in the Ocean” (qtd. in Brown 32-33).

¹³ According to Portell Vilá, around the middle of the nineteenth century, a third of Cuba’s foreign trade was with the United States (1952: 179).

¹⁴ In discussing the United States’ objections to British and French interest in Cuba, Portell Vilá cites John C. Calhoun, who in 1845 stated that if Cuba were to gain independence from Spain: “Cuba [...] shall not be into any other hands but ours [...] because that island is indispensable to the safety of the United States” (1952: 175).

¹⁵ He asserted:

[...]pero es de justicia decir que la realidad de la vida de López mientras estuvo consagrado a la empresa revolucionaria, no confirmó ni por un momento los temores de los desconfiados, y que, por el contrario, su conducta fue ejemplar, de abnegado sacrificio y de lealtad absoluta en el movimiento como el más puro de los cubanos comprometidos, sin que la amenaza ni el soborno intentado, ni las dificultades de todo género lo arredrasen. (1952: 191)

See also the studies of Quisenberry and Caldwell.

¹⁶ For Chaffin, the evidence of Villaverde’s letter and his lost diary where he denies López’s wish to annex Cuba to the United States is not “compelling” and not very “plausible” (223).

¹⁷ Betancourt Cisneros attested: “si los muchachos -de la escuela del General López- logran invadir la Isla, ni yo ni los que conmigo trabajan tenemos la más leve parte en ello. Yo solo trabajo en una invasión con el acuerdo, beneplácito, medios y recursos de mis amigos de Cuba y de los Estados Unidos” (qtd. in Morales y Morales 207).

¹⁸ Macías wrote:

El respeto que siempre he sentido por la memoria de aquel hombre tan noble y generoso como perseguido y desgraciado, me impone el triste deber de dirigir á Vd. estas líneas para asegurar de la manera más positiva, que el General Narciso López sacrificó su elevada posición social y cuanto en el mundo tenía, sólo por conquistar la independencia de la Isla de Cuba; no promovió, aceptó la idea de anexión como necesaria para unificar la opinión de los cubanos, y conseguir la cooperación y ayuda de la Junta Revolucionaria de la Habana, compuesta en su mayor parte de anexionistas. (Letter titled “Aclaraciones” addressed to Juan B de Luna; qtd. in Morales y Morales 253)

¹⁹ Villaverde states: “No creyó ni aprobó la proyectada invasión del país por tropa voluntaria extranjera, mercenaria, sin otro objeto que el del pillaje y el lucro. Además, que tenía en muy poco las condiciones del pueblo bajo americano para la guerra. Pero ¿qué remedio? Ya era tarde para negarse” (1891: 113-14).

²⁰ “El Gobierno español en Cuba es el ladrón que roba y que despoja á Cuba de todo cuanto tiene; pero el Gobierno de los Estados Unidos es el raptor que la viola y deshonra” (Villaverde, 1891: 115).

²¹ Portell Vilá cites a letter in which Cuba’s Captain General José Gutiérrez de la Concha blamed the custom of sending well-to-do young men to study to the United States as a source of “subversive” ideas in Cuba. (1952: 184-185). Poyo also points out the influence of Cuban businessmen with offices in the United States, besides the increasing tendency among Cubans to send their children to be educated there (7).

²² As does Tzvetan Todorov in “Ten Years Without Primo Levi:

Levi develops two ideas. The first is that memory is always imperfect. We do not use it in a disinterested way, but more often than not to protect ourselves from the past. It is therefore neither faithful nor worthy of confidence. We rearrange the past. It is therefore neither faithful nor worthy of confidence. We rearrange the past according to our own interest. (4)