A light-skinned mulata passes for white and begins a romantic relationship that ends tragically, revealing the intransigence of racial barriers; a mother raises her biological daughter as her step-daughter, so that she might adopt a white identity; a multiethnic society is shaken by dreams and anxieties of social mobility: These are some of the traits shared by Ambarina (Virginia Auber, 1858) and Carmela (Ramón Meza, 1887), the two novels that I will analyze in this essay. However inconceivable and melodramatic they may seem to contemporary readers, their plots were based on widespread social practices in nineteenth-century Cuba. The rapid economic expansion that began in the second half of the eighteenth century led not only to the introduction of massive numbers of slaves into the island but also to greater social mobility and the emergence of a large class of free people of color. Both Ambarina and Carmela focus on this emergent class, but they also make clear that individuals of all classes were engaged in similar efforts at ascending the social ladder.

Given their affinities and their differential location in history, both texts help to shed light on the particularly Cuban inflection of the obsession with identity and impostors which, according to many critics, defines the nineteenth-century novel in the western world (Brooks 2011, 3). And what the Cuban case shows, as I argue here, is that the emphasis on deception that has traditionally marked analyses of impostors hinders our ability to acknowledge another important dimension of the problem—one that reveals that the ‘fraud’ may be less conscious than what we tend to expect, and that its ‘victims’ may occupy that position willingly. Both Ambarina and Carmela present us with situations of racial passing in which the impostor may not be aware of being one, and in which people intentionally turn a blind eye to supposed ‘deceptions.’ Thus, while critics have tended to focus on the turning points in passing narratives—e.g. the moments when what is supposed to be the truth is exposed, or when the disparity between the
apparent and the real provokes a tragic outcome—, I argue here that these novels elicit a different kind of reading from us. Even though passing acquires maximum visibility when it fails, or when the impostor is framed as such, its core might instead reside in a quotidian and active not-knowing or looking the other way, a phenomenon sometimes complemented by the existence of subjects who ‘pass’ without any intention to do so.

Race in Nineteenth-Century Cuban Fiction

Published by Virginia Felicia Auber de Noya, a Spanish native who lived and wrote in Havana for almost forty years, *Ambarina* still echoes the constant fears of a black rebellion that peaked in 1844 with the *Conspiración de la escalera* (Ladder Conspiracy), an alleged plot of people of color that led to a ferocious repression on the part of the colonial authorities and served to check the growing social power of free blacks. During this moment, white Cubans comprised only 47 percent of the population, a demographic predicament that set the stage for anxiety about their diminishing power (Castellanos 1988, 175). This is the context in which Auber frames slavery and the color line as unjust but unavoidable realities with which all Cubans must learn to live. *Carmela*, on the other hand, was published in 1887 by the Cuban-born Ramón Meza y Suárez Inclán, and it reflects the transition between two worlds: That of the old economy of *enganos*, or sugar mills, still present in *Ambarina* (in which the plantation and the mill conformed a single complex), to the large-scale technologies represented by the central; or, that of an economy based on slavery to one based on wage labor. As the novel shows, the 1886 royal decree that abolished slavery could not be expected to effectively eliminate social barriers between whites and people of color—the social prejudice against interracial marriages, for example, would certainly not disappear (Castellanos 1992, 225–226).1

1 From a thematic point of view, both *Ambarina* and *Carmela* are part of a broader corpus of Cuban fiction that deals with slavery and racial categories. This corpus begins with the antislavery works composed by several members of Domingo del Monte’s literary circle between 1838 and 1841—in the context of the abolitionist campaign fueled by Richard Madden, former consul in Havana—, and reaches maximum visibility in 1882 with the publication of *Cecilia Valdés* in New York. As a general rule, this type of work was not permitted by the Cuban authorities during the period. As is shown by the case of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sub* (1841), which was decommissioned at the port.
Rather than on slaves, both novels focus on that large social class composed by free people of color and, in particular, on free *mulatas* whose physical appearance, speech, and behavior allow them to ‘pass’—the verb that designates the ability to construct a public identity different from the private one; in the case of *mulatas* with amber-like or caramel-like skins, an identity as white.\(^3\) The racial impostors represented in the two novels help us to grasp and at least partially reconstruct social understandings of racial divisions in late nineteenth-century Cuba and, more importantly, to explore the regimes of knowledge in which these ‘impostors’ operated. These regimes were certainly based on the possibility of distinguishing appearances from a deeper truth, or simulacra from authentic identities, and this is how they have usually been treated by scholars. As I argue here, however, passing can also be analyzed in terms of a different relationship to truth and representation, one that allowed subjects to turn a blind eye to certain realities, and to take certain identities at face value. Even though their light skin and their ability to talk and behave as white are at the basis of both Ambarina’s and Carmela’s ability to pass, there is a further condition underlying this ability: A widespread social commitment to oblivion and

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2 Even though it also designs a mixed-race individual, the English term “mulatto” has negative connotations that are not necessarily present in the Spanish “mulato” or “mulata.” (In fact, the Spanish word “mulata” is often employed in studies of Latin America written in English, suggesting the difficulty of conceiving of an identity beyond the black/white binary in the context of U.S. history). It should also be noted that the racial and sexual stereotype of the *mulata* was fundamental for the development of a literary discourse of Cuban miscegenation and nationalism (Kutzinski 1993, 6-7; Guevara 2005, 113). On the ideology of miscegenation in Cuban culture, see also Duno Gottberg (2003).

3 The bibliography on passing is large and varied. For a good point of departure see Ginsberg (1996).
ignorance, an active *not-knowing* which ranges from civil inattention and tactful reserve to hypocrisy and unconscious disavowal.

**Unwilling Impostors**

The concept of ‘adelantar la familia’ (advancing one’s family) expresses with utmost clarity the conscious efforts to whiten the social location of oneself and one’s relatives characteristic of nineteenth-century Cuba and central to both novels. Even though lineage imposed a very clear limit to upward mobility, it would be a mistake to consider it insurmountable, as the work of scholars such as Verena Martínez Alier has shown: At a minimum, the 250 petitions for interracial marriages recorded in the island during the nineteenth-century show that racial endogamy was not strictly enforced (1989, 57). Similarly, it should be noted that free unions were fairly common.4

Cuban literature of this period engaged constantly with the conflicts and scandals that arose when subjects crossed the limits of their ‘true’ social position, revealing the intensified fears of white elites and, consequently, their increased efforts to patrol class and color lines. It is therefore not surprising that the main social and epistemological problem foregrounded by passing narratives is that of appearances. Appearances, as everybody knows, can be deceiving—in academic environments marked by deconstruction, at least as deceiving as the presumption that there is a reality that precedes them. In fact, within contemporary scholarship, traditional definitions of passing, which implied the existence of a unitary and essential identity that is masked by a fake one, have been generally

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4 Martínez Alier considered the frequency of free unions a sign of the centrality of class—rather than race—in Cuban society:

“By virtue of the class rather than racial nature of the Cuban social order, hypergamous marriage with its status-maximizing implications could not be approved of as a general rule, while hypergamous free unions, entailing no automatic loss of status by the white male but some social advancement on the part of the inferior woman and her offspring, could be tolerated.” (ibid., 138)

For Martínez Alier, the fact that Cuba was ordered in terms of class meant that phenotype was simply a way of determining the subject’s distance to the class of slaves. In this sense, the opportunities for upward mobility of light-skinned *mulatas* like Ambarina and Carmela were higher than those of their darker relatives.
displaced by approaches that conceive of identity as performative, multiple, and dynamic. In this sense, passing is often understood as an act that puts racial categories and essentialist conceptions of identity in crisis, revealing their culturally constructed nature. Valerie Rohy, for example, notes that passing “marks ‘race’ and ‘sexuality’ as fictions of identity [in the sense that it] both invokes and unravels the logic of primary and secondary, authenticity and inauthenticity [...] by placing in question the priority of what is claimed as ‘true’ identity” (1996, 225–227).

But even as we acknowledge that essentialist definitions can hardly resist critical interrogation, it is necessary to remember that the analytical models at work in daily life during the Cuban nineteenth century were far from interrogating identity in these terms. On the one hand, passing was simply defined in terms of inauthenticity. In this sense, Cuba can be compared to the U.S., where the white/black binary has traditionally served to characterize passing as fraud or deception. Kevin R. Johnson, for example, recently observed that “[p]assing is a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct,” also adding that the passer can be distinguished “from the person who is merely mistaken” (2003, 28).

On the other hand, however, the Cuban case shows that limiting the inquiry to the distinction between authentic and inauthentic or between deception and mistake might be a rather inadequate way of understanding social practices. Simply put, our efforts to unmask impostors or to deconstruct the very system of representation according to which it would be possible to stipulate the precedence of an authentic reality that is subsequently hidden by fake appearances might make us lose sight of a number of simultaneous phenomena, equally relevant from both a social and an epistemological point of view. These phenomena, as I suggested above, include self-deception, hypocrisy, and disavowal, and their recurrence in the literary works of the period suggests the need for a type of analysis that allows for a conceptualization of unwilling impostors.

Ambarina, for example, begins with a case of unconscious and involuntary passing. Since her biological parents make an effort to ensure that she grows up believing that she is white, Ambarina does not know she is a racial impostor. The mulata Mariana, who gave birth to her, passes as her surrogate mother, thus helping her daughter to achieve the higher social standing associated with whiteness—and even to embrace a racist
ideology that leads her to lament the natural inferiority of mulatas like Mariana. It is only as a teenager that Ambarina gets to know her father, a white ingenio owner who wants her to marry Bernardo Arribas, and who, right before dying, writes a letter to Mariana asking her to never reveal to Ambarina that she is not white. Bernardo intercepts this letter, shows it to Ambarina, breaks the engagement, and decides to keep the secret as a form of blackmail. Shocked at the news, Ambarina attempts suicide and later retires to the countryside, in order to live as far as possible from the social world that condemns her to a subaltern role. She eventually marries Octavio, a dying man who has courted her for a long time, as a means of comforting him in his passage to the other world. Octavio, however, ends up not dying, and Ambarina is forced to pass for white in front of him until much later, when Bernardo reveals the truth, Octavio abandons her, and she commits suicide.

So when we turn our attention to the long period of Ambarina’s life during which she believes that she is white, we find a very particular kind of passing, in which the subject is not aware of it. Ambarina is just the vehicle for a deception articulated by her parents. In a way, her position is still the one of the deceiver; simultaneously, she is simply mistaken. This complicates Johnson’s model, illuminating a social reality that can seldom be reduced to such clear-cut schemes and that often renders the distinction between intentional and unintentional murky, if not completely useless. Should we say, for example, that Ambarina only begins to pass after she reads the letter that reveals that her mother is a mulata? If that were the case, is she already passing by not immediately sharing this revelation with the rest of the world? Could we describe her decision to quit social life, embrace chastity and retire to the countryside as an act of passing, even if that decision was made precisely to avoid having to pretend that she is white? And is she passing by not mentioning that she is not white to the dying man who desperately wants her to marry him? These are the kinds of questions inevitably culled up by the convoluted forms of passing that the novel displays.

In spite of the similarities in their plots, Carmela shows important differences with respect to Ambarina. More subtle in its depiction of the way in which characters interrelate, and published when the Cuban process of emancipation had just been completed, Meza’s text presents us with a more complex (because more realistic) picture of passing, both in terms of its psychological dimension and of the social world that makes it possible.
The novel, for instance, explores the mirroring of deception and self-deception that comes with hypocrisy. Carmela’s mother, we read, “had become so used to maintaining thusly the illusion of her own deceit she believed that everyone else was also deceived” (Meza 1887, 116). The romantic relationship between her daughter and Joaquín, a member of one of the most aristocratic families on the island, however, will end abruptly when the deceit is exposed by Joaquín’s father, don Julián—who, coincidentally, is also an impostor, feigning that his family still has money in order to keep his creditors at bay. Doña Justa is more than shocked when don Julián enters her house to proclaim the social abyss that separates his family from hers. Similarly, since she grows up identifying as an unmarked white girl, it is relatively easy for Carmela to disavow the signs of her social inferiority, which are described as “vague” and “weak shadows” that can easily be dispelled by the clarity that emanates from her “young and pure soul” (ibid., 191). Seduced and abandoned by Joaquín, Carmela has a child whom she deems “as white” and “as pure” as his father (ibid., 151). When she learns that Joaquín is getting married to another woman, she goes to the church to expose him, and at the precise moment of the ceremony when the priest asks if there are any objections to the marriage, she makes her spectacular comeback:

“A sharp cry, a roar as if from a rabid hyena whose echo seemed to grow and resound throughout the temple, shook the congregation.

   From a dark corner near the altar a human form leapt forth, a shadow, a specter, who unleashed a cry that seemed to come from the very depths of her being:
   ‘Yes…here!’
   And with her stiff arms she held up a handsome child whose silhouette came into relief behind the flickering altar while the candles, like stars or flaming halos, encircled the form of the hardy little one.” (ibid., 198)

Joaquín, however, has successfully become an impostor: He can pass for someone who does not know her. In a society both deeply hierarchical and so prone to disavowals, it comes as no surprise that Carmela’s screams are taken as the sign of a madwoman. Don Julián, who also knows her,

5 I would like to thank Micah McKay for his help translating this and all subsequent citations from Spanish into English.
6 In her influential Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, Sibylle Fischer explores a particular form of disavowal in nineteenth-century Cuba: that of revolutionary antislavery movements.
demands that the unknown madwoman be removed from the temple and the ceremony resumes, as if nothing had happened.

Critiquing the foundational role that J.L. Austin assigns to the marriage-making speech act “I do”, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pointed out that it would be a mistake to take for granted the agency of any given subject “as if he or she were all but coextensive—at least, continuous—with the power by which the individual speech act is initiated and authorized and may be enforced” (2003, 76). In the case of nineteenth-century Cuba, this was clear with respect to the ability of interracial couples to get married, but also in the case of couples of uneven social extraction more generally. Even if Carmela had been white, the novels suggests, don Julián would have objected to her legal union with his son—among other reasons, because his family needed the assets and social connections that would come with a wealthy bride. Therefore, the initial desire expressed by Joaquín, which is to marry Carmela in spite of his family’s wishes (“I do get married… I do get married, and I do get married”), he obsessively repeats to himself when he sees that his relationship is in danger, Meza 1887, 120), will not lead to a legal tie. Rather, it will only prosper in the terrain in which relationships between white men and subaltern women usually developed: that of free unions. Even Carmela’s pregnancy will not suffice to guarantee a wedding. However vociferously they may proclaim their love, neither their speech acts (“I do”) nor their physical ones (a sexual relationship; hyena-like screaming) achieve the social legitimacy needed to provoke legal consequences.

Gossip

Carmela’s roar represents a desperate exception in a society dominated by the avoidance of open disclosure—a society of gossips. Inasmuch as it happens behind somebody’s back, gossip could be in fact defined as a social articulation of a non-confrontational form of knowledge—even if laughter and whispers may reach the person who is the target of the gossips. In contrast with Auber’s, Meza’s novel conceives of rumors as a necessary mediating force, rather than a catastrophic outcome. In that sense, the novel is not structured around a secret but around open secrets: It does not present us with a world in which a private letter is intercepted
by an evil blackmailer but with one in which other people’s secrets are quickly learned by everybody, contributing to a tide of gossip in which what is known becomes indistinguishable from what is suspected.\(^7\) Towards the beginning of the novel, for example, we learn that the parties regularly hosted by doña Justa arouse the suspicion of some of her guests:

“Many said that Justa would throw these parties with the aim of finding an attractive suitor for her goddaughter Carmela, and in that they were certainly not mistaken; but it must be said on behalf of the good and kind lady of the house that she had never thought of the matter quite so coarsely as her gossiping neighbors put it when they whispered about it to one another […]. Other crueler or more flippant gossips said that doña Justa held her parties in order to rub shoulders with people of higher standing than herself, since it was quite clear to everyone that she endeavored to pass as a white person without being one. Those who held such an opinion were certainly not far from the truth; however, since doña Justa offended no one with her desire to better herself and raise herself up—a desire which is, in fact, in complete accord with human nature—they did very poorly in spreading such gossip.” (ibid., 20)

The narrator points out a mistake that is as common to the gossipers as to critics who would like to see a radical chasm between appearance and reality. Justa—who in spite of lying about her daughter’s and her own ethnic origins shows the most honorable of behaviors throughout the novel, and whose name already speaks of the justice to which she aspires—might want Carmela to find a good husband, but she is not the kind of person who would try to accomplish that too "coarsely." That is why her efforts at passing for white are described as harmless: Since they "offended no one," the real harm is caused by the mean-spirited gossipers who "spread" something that could be rather acknowledged with civil silence. It is only their envy, we read, which leads them to criticize Justa and to jeopardize the discreet behavior required to advance one’s social position without encumbering others and that seeks to avoid scandal at all costs. Of course, envy being more prevalent than justice in the social world, Justa cannot expect rumors to disappear. When Carmela escapes with Joaquín, for example, no amount of reserve and discretion is enough to avoid the gossip in the neighborhood, and when Justa and her seduced daughter

\(^7\) As Patricia Spacks has argued in her classic study, gossip arises precisely from “knowledge of the impossibility of knowing. We continue to talk about others precisely because we cannot finally understand them” (90). On the traditional conceptualization of gossip as a way of controlling the morals of a given community see Gluckman (1963) and Merry (1984); for feminist understandings see Adkins (2002) and Jones (1990).
begin to visit the courts of law, they must suffer the whispers of even the petty thieves. The most she can do is to cultivate the discretion needed to navigate such a world—for example, by only resorting to the law (and therefore scandal) when all other means have proven unsuccessful.

Rumors are of course also present in *Ambarina*, but they work in a more schematic way: Rather than the quotidian chitchat of neighbors, they are like the tambourines that announce an execution. Virginia Auber introduces her readers into a universe in which the purity of some characters contrasts with the extreme impurity of others, generating conflicts in black and white that do not allow for the kind of negotiations present in *Carmela* and that recurrently lead to this moralizing message: Social norms must be respected even if they are unfair. Up to a certain extent, Ambarina shares with Carmela the inescapable destiny of free mulatas seduced by white men: No matter how pure their intentions are, their love leads them into a forbidden territory in which the only possible outcome is tragedy. But whereas *Carmela* explores in greater detail that middle-ground that allowed the dreams of marrying a white person to exist in the first place (as the historiography shows, those marriages were not impossible), Virginia Auber conceives of that space as an abyss.

Already a conscious impostor, Ambarina has a long conversation with Octavio about the works of James Fenimore Cooper. When she shows sympathy for Cora, the mixed-race character of *The Last of the Mohicans* whose beauty and virtues do not suffice to make Major Heyward see her with the same eyes with which he sees the white Alice, Octavio expresses the following opinion:

“Between Cora and Alice, I myself would have chosen as a companion the one who would not have passed along to my children a stain that would pit them against society as its enemies. When we are at a distance from our fellow man we can scorn his laws, but when we live within his circle we must respect them. […] Yes, I, too, wish for my descendants to proclaim like Hawkeye, ‘My blood is pure and unmixed,’ and like Heyward, I would not have dared to love Cora.” (Auber 1989, 248)

Confronted with such a stern man, Ambarina has no alternative than to keep passing. Her secret has already become a cross, and her situation occasionally seems to her even worse than that of slaves, whom she regards with a mix of despise and envy: “They are human beings in spite of their abjection, and perhaps what we see as apathetic stupidity is the virtue of one who submits without fruitless fits of rage to the implacable edicts of
destiny.” (Ibid., 164). This convergence of racism and fatalism will eventually lead Octavio to flee the island and Ambarina to commit suicide. Even though he fell in love with and married a woman of color, Octavio does not dare to be her spouse. And what he fears is precisely that ‘circle’ in which humans gather as a society. From this site not only moral laws but also the rumors that mark their infringement emerge: “Ridicule, in my view, has always been the most fearful weapon; the idea that as I pass by there may be whispering and laughter has at all times struck me as the worst of calamities” (Ibid., 146). Unsurprisingly, when Ambarina’s secret is revealed and his ridicule becomes clear, Octavio sees abandoning Cuba as his best option.

Ramón Meza, on the other hand, presents us with a somber description of a world in which identities are not articulated in secret but in the midst of the tension between what is supposed to be secret and what can be openly said or confronted. Joaquín, for example, is warned by his father that he is being fooled by Carmela, to no avail. In fact, when he approaches her house to pay one of his numerous visits, one of the neighbors exclaims: “He’s here! Run! Go see him! Sure enough, that half-breed Carmela won’t let him get away! He’s being trapped, he’s being trapped! What a dummy!” (Meza 1887, 78). Passing is thus described as a public spectacle—one which could be hardly pinned down by those analytical models that conceive of secrecy as something that is actually secret. In that respect, the fact that Carmela is called ‘half-breed’ by her neighbors does not reveal any hidden truth, but simply foregrounds hers and her mother’s efforts at negotiating a white identity; these not totally failed efforts, in fact, allow those same neighbors to mingle with distinguished guests during doña Justa’s home parties.

True, neither Carmela nor her mother can erase their blackness completely, at least in the proximity of those who are aware of the family history. Those who want to believe that Carmela is white, however, have the option of doing so. Joaquín’s love makes him deaf to the open secret of Carmela’s race and to the words of advice of his father, who wants him to immediately end all contact with a notoriously inferior family. Why would he believe the rumors, Joaquín wonders? And even if they are true, isn’t his love stronger than social prejudices? Cornered by his father, he thinks in desperation: “they’re lies, all lies… And at any rate, I love her, she loves me, and that is enough” (Ibid., 120). But even if he tries to manipulate social norms and family expectations by eloping with Carmela
in order to show his commitment and possibly force a marriage (a gambit with honor that was fairly common in Catholic societies), his failure will come shortly after. Trying to avoid the social and legal consequences with which doña Justa threatens them if a marriage is not promptly celebrated, don Julián forces his son to depart for New York. The geographical distance—which protects him from an inferior marriage and from the rumors that Carmela’s pregnancy undoubtedly provokes—converges with racial and class distances in such an effective way that Carmela is left totally behind, and Joaquín is eventually able to pass for someone who does not know her. Similarly, in order to protect her honor, the pregnant Carmela leaves Havana with her mother for a long period of time, after which she returns with a lovely niece; the neighborhood has changed enough to give her hopes that her story—which repeats that of her mother—will not be openly contested.

Willing Victims

Despite the importance of gossip in the mediation between the apparent and the real, Ambarina and Carmela also represent many other types of social practices in which the avoidance of open disclosure or direct confrontation plays a fundamental mediating role: withholding knowledge out of self-interest (as in the case of Bernardo, who intercepts the letter that reveals Ambarina’s origins and decides to blackmail her); withholding knowledge out of loyalty and respect (as in the case of Inés, who has long figured out that her friend Ambarina is not white, but is kind enough to never mention it to her); hypocrisy (as in the case of the many neighbors who pretend not to suspect that doña Justa is Carmela’s mother); or straight disavowal (as in the case of Joaquín, who does not want to believe that Carmela is not white.)

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the different social functions of this not-knowing, as well as the numerous pacts that regulate its articulations (manners, decorum, the logic of love or friendship, the rules of urban anonymity, etc.), it is worth foregrounding the fundamental tension that subtends regimes of knowledge in both novels: The one between reserve (the performance of not-knowing) and open disclosure (its opposite). Virginia Auber and Ramón Meza make constant reference to
this tension, which might therefore be thought of as an indispensable component in the narrative recreation of passing. Among the many examples that Ambarina includes, three should suffice to make this point clear. In the first place, the case of Inés, Ambarina’s best friend, who initially tries to show to her father that his spouse is cheating on him, until she learns a very simple lesson: He would rather believe the contrary. Being a good daughter thus entails pretending not to know that her stepmother is evil—in the same way that, being a good friend, she pretends not to know that Ambarina is not white. In the second place, the case of Francisco, the overseer who aims at subduing a slave rebellion at the plantation by telling the slaves who have surrounded the house and are shooting at him that they woke up too early, and that they should go back to sleep so that they are well-rested for work the next morning. In the third place, a case that involves the protagonist: Just after the evil Bernardo reveals that she is a mulata, Ambarina wonders if it would be possible to remain white in the eyes of her husband by simply asking him to forget what he just heard. Given the gravitas with which Virginia Auber wrote, there is no point in looking for humorous overtones in the last two examples, which read out of context would otherwise seem intentionally absurdist. Instead, they show that even in the most desperate of situations, characters attempt that pretense of not-knowing with which they have striven for well-being throughout their lives.

Carmela also represents this tension, leading readers to visualize not only the importance of reserve but also the horrible way the world appears when it recedes. The dialogue between don Julián and doña Justa when he visits her house to put an end to his son’s relationship is a perfect example of Meza’s ability to show the many folds that mediate between reserve and openness, as well as the devastating psychological effects of going too far in the direction of the latter. After listening for a while to don Julián, doña Justa warns him: “there is no need to make those hurtful insinuations” (ibid., 117). Simply put, she does not want to admit that the insinuations have very concrete grounds, and he does not want to say what he is suggesting that he knows. Whether out of respect for a lady who seems very polite or out of fear of incurring in the vulgarity of being explicit about a delicate topic, don Julián makes a demand that summarizes the silently expressive power of the performance of not-knowing: “don’t make me say what is” (ibid., 126). After beating around the bush for a long time, he eventually says what he came to say but did not want to: that he knows
that Carmela is not white. At that moment the old and almost forgotten worries of doña Justa reemerge, “brought to mind by the ruthless voice of a stranger who, with a sarcastic tone, had cruelly wounded her. All of the bitterness of reality had welled up once again around her, with its obscene nakedness, with its deathly cold” (ibid.).

This ruthless and sarcastic voice strips reality of its veils and exposes it as it really is. But as the recurrence of the performances of not-knowing suggests, this reality might be unbearable not just because it is unfair (no matter how wonderful a young woman, Carmela will be always considered inferior) but also because it presents itself with “obscene nakedness”. Passing and imposture could therefore be conceived not only as ways to advance one’s place in society, but also as a defense mechanism against a reality that, like Medusa, cannot be looked in the eyes.

Turning a Blind Eye

The modern, biologized epistemology of race, as Samira Kawash has argued in her study of the color line in the U.S., conceives of phenotype and other physical traits as necessary but insufficient signs to determine the ‘deeper truth’ of race (1997, 130). The fact that blackness can be imperceptible means precisely that “the stability of discrete racial identities is based not only on visibility but on knowability” (ibid., 132). Approaching that ‘deeper truth’ thus requires navigating a sea of appearances in which simulacra (i.e., passing) represent a constant danger. And it is because visibility and knowability do not always converge that the light-skinned Ambarina and Carmela can pass for white, thus provoking an epistemological crisis that, from Kawash’s perspective, would foreground “the collapse of the continuity between representation and identity, appearance and being” (ibid., 134). But what are the limits of this analytical model for the study of contexts like Cuba, in which the social order that aimed at keeping whiteness and blackness separated also included, as we have seen, countless examples to the contrary, such as interracial free unions and marriages? And, more broadly, should we not expect ‘knowability’ to be a complex realm crossed by contradictory forces—at a minimum, reserve and disclosure, disavowal and open confrontation?
Narratives like *Ambarina* and *Carmela* represent passing as an act that questions the fundamental distinction upon which a racist society is based (black is not white), but they also show that this questioning does not entail the ‘collapse’ of either epistemological or social orders. Rather, it represents just a moment in a broader struggle for power in which mixed-race characters like doña Justa or Carmela attempt to ‘adelantar la familia’ with some success, while white ones like Joaquin enter with love into the abject otherness of the non-white world. This struggle was of course not the same in 1858 and in 1887. Separated by almost 30 years, both novels are located at opposite extremes of the historical trajectory that moves from a colony in which the elites deemed slavery a necessary evil and the crossing of the color line something illicit, to a nation embarked on a cycle of movements for independence that certainly saw the persistence of racial stereotypes and barriers, but that also included the formation of a multiracial army, the abolition of slavery, and the development of a nationalist discourse based on the idea of racelessness.8

Even if the novelists organize their narratives around a tragic climax in which black and white show their incompatibility, they also include a number of hints that indicate how things could have been different—and, in some cases, were. In both novels, the racist postulation of an essential difference between black and white coexists with the quotidian postponement of such a distinction. However fragile, this postponement should not be overlooked: Without denying the fact that Cuba was a racist society, it shows that racist values coexisted with others—such as the liberal belief in the importance of individual merit (Martínez Alier 1989, xiii)—, fueling the type of conflicts that keep historical change in motion. The negation *we cannot know if that person is black or white*, which for deconstructionist critics speaks to the downfall of the epistemological model that claims the possibility of distinguishing simulacra from authentic identities, might also turn out to be a significant affirmation: *We can* not know—i.e., we have the ability of not knowing, and we exert it when it suits our best interest. That is why, rather than a conceptual ‘collapse’ of the binary appearance/being, it might be worth studying the concrete contexts in which social agents decide whether to pay attention to such a

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8 The link between the Cuban struggles for independence and discussions around race has been eloquently studied by Ferrer (1990); on the concept of racelessness in particular see 7-10. For another in-depth study of late nineteenth-century Cuba, see Scott (1985).
binary—to invoke it as an indisputable fact, or to turn a blind eye to its sinister workings.

Works Cited


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