

Tales of Healers and Doctors: Enlightened Pedagogy and Modernization in Cuban *Costumbrismo*

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Abstract

The aesthetic movement known as costumbrismo burst during the 19th in Spain and Latin America, and it did so into various modes of artistic expression such as literature, painting, and lithography. In all cases, it aimed at reflecting on the way of life in a given society e.g. its folklore, its institutions, its mannerisms, its social types, etc. The present article delves into Cuban costumbrismo to expose the way in which local writers akin to this aesthetic movement exhibit the local population in correspondence with an ongoing and much desired process of modernization. Specifically, it examines four cuadros de costumbres (sketches of manners of costumbrista nature) that focus on two historically antagonistic social types in Cuba: the médico (the doctor) and the vieja curandera (the old female healer). It demonstrates that the representations of these figures do not only synthesize—at best—the way in which Cuban costumbrista authors managed a process of social and historical change brought about by the tension between local traditions and the emergence of modern scientific discourses as civilizing measures. In doing so, it also reveals the intentions of these authors to legitimize the place of literature in a modernizing world where scientific discourses were also gradually becoming the only authorized language for studying and analysing both the individual and the social body.

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Introduction

Costumbrismo was an artistic trend with several affinities to 19th century Romanticism. It also burst into various modes of artistic expression such as literature, painting, and lithography, aiming in all cases to reflect on the way of life in a given society e.g. its folklore, its

institutions, its mannerisms, etc. *Costumbrismo*, however, has been traditionally associated with the Hispanic scene, although, as many scholars have shown, individual and collective manifestations of *costumbrismo* appeared in other European countries as well.ⁱ *Costumbrismo* also defers from Romanticism in other important aspects, such its attention to

ongoing local customs and its claim to objectivity and realism. While romantic artists focused predominantly on a distant past, most *costumbrista* artists focused on a present-time—geared towards a future—by means of embracing the educational and pedagogical principles of the Enlightenment. In other words, *costumbrismo* was an aesthetic movement characterized by having a more rational and systematic approach to the natural world and to society. It was, as Domínguez puts it, “a technology of description and classification for the construction of racial and social typologies” (2016, p. 138). And as such, notes Teuber, “it was also a powerful mental tool for imagining, building, or redesigning communities worth belonging to in the future” (2018, p. 138).ⁱⁱ

Costumbrismo circulated mainly in the form of the so-called *cuadros de costumbres*, short prose articles intended to capture and represent the landscape, the customs, the habits, and the paradigmatic types of society. They were characterized by having a simple narrative structure, a well-defined moralistic intention, and a tone that would range between the humorous and the burlesque. All of which were features that made them very popular among a growing reading community. Such popularity was also fueled by the extraordinary development that the written press had been experiencing since the beginning of the century in Europe, for *cuadros de costumbres* proliferated at the time in the newspapers, pamphlets, and literary magazines of the time.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Latin America, the *cuadros de costumbres* modality was largely a product of the imitation of models introduced by Spanish *costumbrista* authors such as Mesoneros Romanos, Estébanez Calderón, Mariano José de Larra, among others.^{iv} Yet, Spanish *costumbrismo* was essentially rooted in the nationalist sentiment and in the mental upheaval produced by the social turmoil of the first decades of the nineteenth century which included the French occupation of Spain and the Spanish loss of most of its American colonies (Losada 2004, p. 334). In Latin America, on the other hand, *costumbrismo* was born in connection with the desire to articulate and affirm the sovereignty of its various

nations, ironically after having defeated Spain in armed conflict. In other words, it emerged as an aesthetic-discursive corpus that showed how the local creole elites were in charge of cataloguing the bodies, the language, and the geography of their territories in order to nationalize them after the recent declarations of independence. As Velayos commented: “After the political acephalia that the 1808 monarchic crisis in the peninsula produced... arose, as one of the main threads of the several intellectual discourses, the need to refer to the conformation, the practices, and the customs rooted in those collectivities to understand and intervene in the political reality of the region” (2018, p. 96).

Despite its exceptional circumstances, the case of Cuba was not very different from the rest of Latin America. On the contrary, the fact that through most of the 19th century Cuba was still a Spanish colony guaranteed the sustainability of a cultural exchange with its colonizer that impelled the development of *costumbrismo* on the island. There, as in continental America, *costumbrista* artists belonged to a privileged class of reformist creole intellectuals who were not satisfied with their reality and had very clear sociopolitical objectives. For them, *costumbrismo* would also serve as a device to articulate local subjectivities in order to express—albeit in a more allegorical way due to the prevailing monarchical censorship—their political disagreements with the colonial regime and to circulate simultaneously a sense of ethnic identity unique to the island. Right up front, as Bueno observed, “they call themselves Cubans” (1985, p. XIV).

But *costumbrismo* in Latin America—including Cuba—was not only a vehicle for creating national imaginaries. It was also, as Martínez-Pinzón and Soriano claimed recently, “an innovative aesthetic practice that constituted one of the representational arsenals with which Latin American *costumbrista* writers and visual artists faced the challenge of modernity after independence” (2016, pp. 9-10). In other words, more than just voicing out the desire of a new social class for self-representation, what Latin American *costumbrismo* expressed was a complex process of intervention in social

habits in order to synchronize these with a new European social panorama marked by the adoption of republican forms of modernization. A modernization that in the case of Latin America “fell on a population that was largely poor, illiterate, ethnically diverse, scarce, and dispersed over a territory marked by great geographical contrasts” (Martínez-Pinzón & Soriano, 2016, p. 9).

The present work delves into Cuban *costumbrismo*, but not to confirm it as an artistic trend that was meant to trace ethnic and political discrepancies between colony and empire—for such a study has already been carried out by others scholars.^v Instead, I follow the later approach that also sees *costumbrismo* as a means for making the implementation of modernization in Latin America assimilable. I look into some Cuban *costumbrista* articles to expose the way in which local writers akin to this aesthetic movement present the local population in correspondence with a desired process of modernization. Specifically, I examine *cuadros de costumbres* (sketches of manners of *costumbrista* nature) that revolve around two historically antagonistic social types: the *médico* (doctor) and the *vieja curandera* (the old female healer). Within Cuban context, these figures do not only synthesize—at best—the way in which local *costumbrista* authors managed a process of social and historical change brought about by the tension between local traditions and the emergence of scientific discourses—key components within the enlightened discourse of modernity—as civilizing measures. They also reveal the intentions of these artists to legitimize the place of literature in a modernizing world where the scientific discourse was gradually becoming the only authorized language for studying and analyzing both the individual and the social body.

To meet such end, I examine the aforementioned social types in four *cuadros de costumbres* published throughout the 19th century in Cuba: “El médico pedante y las viejas curanderas” (The pedantic doctor and the old female healers, 1838) by José Victoriano Betancourt, “Un medico de campo” (A country doctor, 1847) by José María Cárdenas y Rodríguez, “El médico” (The doctor, 1852) by

José Agustín Millán, and “La vieja curandera” (The old female healer, 1881) by Francisco de Paula Gelabert. The chronological study of these texts will enable us to have a panoramic view of the ideological contiguity and discrepancies between authors and the different moments of Cuban *costumbrismo*, as well as a general understanding of *costumbrismo*'s role in the symbolic administration of the modernization process in the island.

Brief Account of Cuban *costumbrismo*

The literature of customs through articles on social types and habits emerged in Cuba at the end of the 18th century, being *Papel Periódico de la Habana* (1790-1805) the first newspaper to published *cuadros de costumbres*. Both, the surfacing and development of this artistic modality, as Bueno explains, were manifestly linked to a sudden economic growth of the island and the needs and demands of the new creole oligarchy that came along with it:

From a monotonous and opaque factory, barely a place of transit to the richest territories of the New Spain and Peru, [Cuba] becomes a flourishing plantation colony. . . The rising Havana oligarchy reflects then veiled enlightenment ideals. They identify the country with their own economic interests. Thus, they seek to emphasize local values, which would lead some of their intellectuals to develop a creole literature on local customs as it is reflected in the pages of the Papel. (1985, p. XII)

In 1800 appeared in Cuba a second precursor of Cuban *costumbrismo*, the weekly newspaper *El Regañón de la Habana*. Similar to *Papel*, *El Regañón* also stood out for its articles on local customs, such as dances, festivals, education, etc. (Bueno 1985, p. XIII). Despite having circulated for one year only, *El Regañón* inspired two subsequent Cuban newspapers of *costumbrista* nature: *El Sustituto del Regañón* (1801-1802), which also lasted only a year, and *El Nuevo Regañón* founded almost three decades after in 1830 (Bueno 1985, p. XIII).

El Nuevo Regañón, as its predecessors, was a short-lived newspaper. The last copy

found corresponds to November 22, 1831. Yet, it was precisely starting the 1830's decade that Cuban *costumbrismo* experienced a second major impulse, this time in direct correspondence with the expansion and the technical advances in the written press. On the one hand, local newspapers and magazines took advantage of the artistic possibilities offered by lithography—a modality recently imported from Europe—and began to publish texts mixed with illustrations, which immediately turned them into a more attractive product (Mégevand 2002, p. 9). On the other, it was around these years that the local sugar aristocracy lived through a second staggering economic boom which benefited the financial stability in the production of newspapers and magazines, for aristocrats were their main consumers (Mégevand, 2002, p. 9).^{vi}

During this journalistic boom, local newspapers and magazines such as *La Siempreviva*, *El Plantel*, *El Faro Industrial*, *El Álbum*, and *El Siglo* filled their pages with *cuadros de costumbres*. Many of these articles were openly intended for mere entertainment, but just as many would express political and social discontent. In 1834, General Tacón, recently appointed governor of Cuba, implemented a law prohibiting the publication of any political, social, religious or philosophical commentary (Mégevand, 2002, p. 6). It is at this point that *costumbrista* articles were seen by many of its Cuban adepts as an ideal formula to avoid censorship. As Bueno points out: “Amidst the impossibility of directly confronting the colonial government, as the censorship imposed an iron gag that was impossible to break, *costumbrista* artists found in their literary practice a suitable vehicle for the diatribe, for the concealed denunciation” (1985, p. XIV). Such denunciations of the colonial regime can be seen through the eagerness of these authors to chart and review customs and habits that they ultimately value—through humor and sarcasm—as stagnant or decadent. Such a deed that would simultaneously exhibit Cuban *costumbrismo* as an aesthetic principle of progress and modern paradigm of civilization through which it was possible to know, diagnose, and prescribe the functioning of the society they aspired to have.

The fascination these *costumbrista* articles caused on readers was eventually exploited by some publishers, as they started releasing *costumbrista* anthologies involving one or several authors. The first collective anthology published in Cuba was *Los cubanos pintados por sí mismos* (1852), which echoes similar collections published a bit earlier in Europe, such as *Los españoles pintados por sí mismos* (1843-1844), which in itself continued the trail opened by the collections *Heads of the People: or Portraits of the English* (1840-1841), and *Les Français peints per eux-mêmes* (1842). In the course of time, other collections were published in Cuba, such as *Artículos de costumbres y poesías* (1867) by Luis Victoriano Betancourt, *Cuadros sociales* by Juan Francisco Valerio (published in three editions in 1865, 1876, and 1883), and *Cuadros de costumbres cubanas* (1875) by Francisco de Paula Gelabert. Lastly, as a means of closure of Cuban *costumbrismo* climatic era, appeared in 1881 the anthology *Tipos y costumbre de la Isla de Cuba*, a comprehensive work which republished *costumbrista* articles that different authors had published throughout the whole century—with a few new additions.

Among the most prominent authors who published *cuadros de costumbres* in the aforementioned newspapers, magazines, and anthologies were Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, Bartolomé José Crespo, Antonio Bachiller y Morales, Felipe Poey, Manuel Costales y Govantes, Anselmo Suárez y Romero, Pedro Santacilia, and Luis Victoriano Betancourt, as well as the four authors whose works I examine in this study: José Victoriano Betancourt, José María de Cárdenas y Rodríguez, José Agustín Millán, and Francisco de Paula Gelabert.

“El médico pedante y las viejas curanderas” (1839)

Published in 1839 in the weekly magazine *La Siempreviva*, “El médico pedante y las viejas curanderas”, by José Victoriano Betancourt (1813-1875), is one of the first *costumbrista* articles to fully reflect on the frictions caused by the modernization process in 19th century Cuba and on the responsibility assumed by the *costumbrista* authors in the implementation of such modernization.

At the beginning of the text, the narrator, a *costumbrista* writer, sets out to visit Don Ciriaco, an elderly creole man who was a good friend of his father. Once in the old man's house, the narrator is informed by a servant that Don Ciriaco is sick, lying in bed. In spite of this, the meeting takes place in the old man's room, where the narrator observes and describes for the reader objects worn by Don Ciriaco which directly place the old man as the embodiment of colonial traditions such as Catholicism: "His shirt was unbuttoned, and two scapulars could be seen on his bare chest, one from La Merced and the other from Carmen, and also a rosary from the Holy House" (Betancourt 1839, p. 228). The subsequent passages give account, in a continuous satirical tone, of incidents related to other characters that parade through Don Ciriaco's room in a bid to cure him while the narrator witnesses the events. The first to do so is *licenciado* Sanguijuela (graduate Leech), whose ridiculous zoological name immediately assigns him negative attributes. This man is a "*medicastro*" (a quack doctor), a charlatan who resorts to pseudo-scientific verbiage to trick and economically exploit his desperate and ignorant patients (Betancourt 1839, p. 229). Following the doctor, three women from the neighborhood enter in succession Don Ciriaco's room. The first one, Mrs. Estanislao, who is also the patient's personal assistant, confronts the doctor as she enters the room and induces Don Ciriaco not to follow his recommendations, arguing that "in the old days no one died except the ones God wanted to" (Betancourt 1839, p. 230). At that point, the doctor leaves the old man's house, but not before ensuring a good payment for his services. Then two old healers, Mrs. Nicolasa and Doña Sinfioriana, enter the patient's room. Mrs. Nicolasa also recommends Don Ciriaco not to pay attention to the doctor's recommendations because "doctors are only good to gain weight and send one to the other side" (Betancourt 1839, p. 231). She then offers her own diagnosis and prescription: "what you have [Don Ciriaco] is hot wind, because you are very flabby...with ten Le Roy purgatives and ten vomiters you will be cured in a jiffy" (Betancourt 1839, p. 231). Mrs. Sinfioriana also offers her own verdict and remedy for the sick old man: "That is nothing but a strong hysteria... You have to make an

omelet with rue, oil, and eggs, and put it over your stomach... and that's it, you should be good and healthy" (Betancourt, 1839, p. 232). The discrepancy in rulings and prescriptions generates an absurd but passionate discussion among healers in view of the undaunted narrator.

Both Don Ciriaco the old healers appear as figures that allegorically combine ignorance, scientific backwardness, and, in general, the lack of modernization in Cuba under the colonial regime. Yet, the presence of *licenciado* Sanguijuela in the story does not give rise to a symbolic confrontation between antagonistic forces—tradition versus modernity. Not only the linguistic construction of the doctor's name—as mentioned before—discredits him before the reader as a reliable agent of science, modernization or enlightened rationality, but also the events after his presentation characterize him as a dishonest and greedy man, more interested in making a good economic deal than in curing his patients. In other words, *licenciado* Sanguijuela is yet another means in the story to denounce the precarious conditions of the medical system on the island and to signal the need to repair it.

It is worth pointing out that well into the 1830s the responsibility for the health of Cubans was split between the municipality of Havana and the Catholic Church. The City Council collected funds for the partial subsidy of hospitals, authorized the commercialization of medicines, and carried out a timid anti-epidemic prophylaxis, while the ecclesiastical authority maintained a copious influence over hospital care thanks to the moral prestige accumulated by some religious orders which specialized in these tasks (López Denis, 2003, p. 12). The Universidad de la Habana—the only institution of higher education on the island at that time—was still controlled by the Dominican Fathers, thus in the Faculty of Medicine all the ambiguous weight of medieval scholasticism was felt (López Denis, 2003, p. 12). Physicians who had graduated from their classrooms had to take exams before the Royal Court of Protomedicato, a corporation that functioned as a guarantor of the ideological, religious, ethnic, and doctrinal purity. After graduation, the graduates would practice their profession without any explicit regulations or

penalties for wrong doings (López Denis 2003, p. 12). Such a situation did not show signs of changing until the following decade, when medical rationalism began to make itself felt on the island. In 1842, four years after Betancourt published his article, the Universidad de la Habana was secularized, being this an event marked the beginning of the decline of the established medical practices and the application in the field of health of new theories and inventions linked to scientific rationalism.^{vii}

Towards the end of Betancourt text the constant caustic criticism on the status of medicine and the lack of ethics in Cuban society ceases, and in turn appears a scene meant to serve as exemplary closing lesson. In it, the narrator intervenes once again in the action of the story, but in this case to remove his friend Don Ciriaco—as if removing Cuba—from the circuit of scientific and ethical backwardness that persecutes him. “Friend”, the narrator addresses Don Ciriaco, “I am going to bring you a doctor worthy of such honorable title... he will explain himself in a clear and simple language that even the most ignorant man can understand; ignore the old healers and the pedantic doctors...” (Betancourt 1839, p. 233). And in indeed, some days later, the narrator returns to Don Ciriaco’s house accompanied by Doctor Experiencia (Doctor Experience), a representative of medical rationalism who examines the sick man with discernment and cures him by prescribing nothing more than diet and rest (Betancourt, 1839, p. 233).

Betancourt’s text does not stand then as an explicit critique of the colonial regime, but rather carries it out in an allegorical way through the characters and their actions. It also does not present itself as mere enthusiastic sermon on the advance of scientific discourse as a modernizing force. As seen, Betancourt acknowledges the arrival of scientific discourse in Cuba and celebrates its potential positive social impact. Yet, he also warns the reader that science might end up serving the interests of charlatan doctors who are no more than an evolved form of traditional charlatans—such as the old healers—and thus it is not wise to let it act without proper intervention. An intervention

that only the *costumbrista* writer, in his capacity as an enlightened individual and privileged witness of the surrounding reality, is able perform through his work. In this respect, Betancourt’s article unfolds as an authorized discourse of mediation to carry out a gentle synchrony between the nation and scientific modernization; as a means for the dissemination of the civic values desired for the future Cuba; and with it all, as an appropriate—and modern—aesthetic method to ensure the prominence of literature as organizer of social life.

“Un médico de campo” (1847)

In 1847, José María Cárdenas y Rodríguez (1812-1882), also known by his pseudonym Jeremías de Docaransa, published his *Colección de artículos satíricos y de costumbres*, which included “Un médico de campo.”

The article begins with a short dialogue between an editor and a *costumbrista* writer—Cárdenas’ alter ego—who identifies himself as Don Jeremías. The editor invites Don Jeremías to write a piece about a country doctor. In response, Don Jeremías offers the editor what are supposed to be the memoirs of a country doctor friend of his—a man satirically named Desiderio Tumbavivos (Tomb-of-the-Living)—which the *costumbrista* writer considers worthy of being published as an *artículo de costumbres*. From that moment on, the article becomes a first-person narrative in which Tumbavivos talks about his mediocre academic background, for he confesses that he would attend the classrooms “to hear lessons that most of the time did not understand”, and about his first experiences in the practice of his profession. He recalls that after graduating he was unable to practice due—he claims—to the monopoly exercised by his “older colleagues” over patients, and thus he decided to leave the city and “become a country doctor” (Cárdenas y Rodríguez 1847, p. 117). He is then hired at *El Concurso*, a sugar mill in rural Cuba owned by a wealthy creole-man. One of his first patients at the sugar mill is a man who suffers from a cold, hence Tumbavivos only instructs him to keep himself warm. On his second visit to the patient, however, the relatives of the sick man refuse to receive the doctor. The reason: not to have prescribed on his first visit. The

incident represents a turning point in the doctor's behavior and life, as he realizes that in order to achieve fame as a country doctor he must abdicate professionalism and act according to the expectations of his ignorant patients: "Well then, I will always prescribe... they want to be impressed, I will impress them; they do not want to understand the doctor, they will not understand me" (Cárdenas y Rodríguez, 1847, p. 119). The story details then Tumbavivos' further progressive ethical degradation. Not only he starts to appeal to the use of scientific technicalities to dazzle his illiterate patients, but also sends them with unnecessary prescriptions to the local apothecary with whom he formalizes a corrupt business alliance. At the end of his testimony, Tumbavivos brags about the economic profits he obtained in the countryside as a consequence of his change in attitude and about his triumphant return to the city where he became "one of the most famous doctors" (Cárdenas y Rodríguez, 1847, p. 124).

"Un medico de campo" can be seen as a sort of extension of Betancourt's text. In both, the dominant theme is the precarious condition of medicine in Cuba and the lack of ethics in its practice. Also, both *cuadros de costumbres* are constituted as disciplinary fictions. Rather than providing a mere humorous description of the events, they show a moral and pedagogical intention to teach what should be the norm of good manners in the formation of future citizenships. "I see no problem in publishing these notes that I have just read," says the editor to Don Jeremías after having read Tumbavivos' testimony (Cárdenas y Rodríguez, 1847, p. 125). To which he adds: "I know some [doctors] who are very worthy of public appreciation; they honor their profession... [but] the few that resemble Tumbavivos well deserve an innocent and festive lesson" (Cárdenas y Rodríguez, 1847, p. 125).

At a different level' the approach that entails telling the story from the doctor's own perspective allows Cárdenas not only to point out the existence of what he believes to be social impediments towards a modern society but also to explore the structural factors and circumstances that make such impediments possible. By 1847' when Cárdenas published

his *cuadro de costumbres*, the Universidad de la Habana had just reached four years as a secularized institution, so traditional forms of medical instruction and practice continued to impose themselves on the forms promoted by the newly imported enlightened rationalism. Similarly, the insinuation of the existence of medical monopolies and fraudulent alliances between doctors and apothecaries underlines the still poor state of the medical system of the time.

Cárdenas' attack on the colonial regime is also manifested in tangential events that Tumbavivos witnesses during his stay at the mill. There we also collide—albeit with sarcasm and dark humor—with the shameful spectacle of the slavery system, the economic base of the Cuban sugar producers. "Fortunately," recalls Tumbavivos, "the master was better informed and knew that out of five descendants of Cham, who had been buried, all three owed their deaths to random accidents" (Cárdenas y Rodríguez, 1847, p. 118).^{viii}

In contrast to Betancourt text, Cardenas' reformist and modernizing vision does not occur then through a confrontation between characters representing old traditions and modernity, but rather by the appearance of a new dichotomy: the countryside and the city. In other words, the dichotomy tradition-modernity is not only temporal, but also spatial. In this respect, barbarism does not only appear linked to the past, but also to the rural; and civilization does not only appear to be linked to the future, but also to the city.

It should be noted that in 1845, a couple of years before the publication of "Un médico de campo", Domingo Faustino Sarmiento formulated an interpretation of Argentine society through a conflict between civilization and barbarism where civilization was identified with the city of Buenos Aires and barbarism with the Argentinian pampas.^{ix} This polarizing concept would serve as the basis of interpretation of Latin American societies during the rest of the 19th century. And yet, in Cárdenas' text this binary-logic will appear somewhat compromised. As we have seen, backwardness, ignorance, exploitation, and violence appear in the text as distinctive signs of rural life. There also lays the idea that the

countryside corrupts urban people, for it is in the countryside where Tumbavivos develops and consolidates his immoral and corrupt habits. His triumphant return to the city also points to the invasion of barbarism of the city's space. But as we have shown, the city as a differentiating space does not reach in the story the complete idealization of civilization, for the text also emphasizes the fact that the loss of ethics experienced by the doctor is related also to his poor professional training in the city's educational institutions. Faced with such a scenario, the *costumbrista* intellectual emerges again to intervene and control the contingency; emerges to point out the errors and defects of civilization that prevent the execution of the modernizing project. Because also for Cárdenas, writing is a means to bring chaos into order: a means to modernize Cuba.

“El médico” (1852)

In 1852, playwright José Agustín Millán directed the collection *Los cubanos pintados por sí mismos* where he included his article “El médico”, the first Cuban *cuadro de costumbres* that came accompanied by a lithograph of the character in question.

Unlike the *cuadros* analyzed above, in Millán's “El Médico” there is no defined plot, but only a narrator who conveys in the first-person observations and conclusions meant to offer a faithful representation of the average Cuban doctor. In this case, though, the author's assessment of this topic exposes a parallel issue that is also part of the sociocultural changes that enlightened modernity brought to Cuba: modern capitalism.^x As we have seen, economic greediness appears as a characteristic linked to doctors in Betancourt's and Cárdenas' articles, but in “El médico” it acts as an additional leitmotif. In other words, Millán uses the figure of the doctor not only to examine the state of the medical field in Cuba, but also emergence of new capitalist forms and mechanisms.

The story begins with a narrator who claims that there is still a need to draw up a *cuadro* of the Cuban doctor in his most generalized version, a task for which he offers himself. From then on, the *cuadro* develops into a caustic satire of the state of the medical

field on the island. The narrator attacks first the sudden and excessive appearance in Havana of doctors and pharmacists, for he understands that such a phenomenon is caused by the pursue of immediate economic remuneration (Millán, 1852, p. 182). In doing so, he admits that modernization has come to the city in the form of the emergence of a professional class; yet he also warns the reader that the course of events has been chaotic, leading to the outbreak of social ills such as capitalist greed: “There are in every street two or three pious establishments run by these masters who are as useful to the public as they are to themselves” (Millán, 1852, p. 182).

The article continues with a series of generic conjectures meant to signal further what the author believes to be central reasons behind the backwardness of the medical field in Cuba. Similar to Cárdenas, Millán reproaches the poor academic formation of doctors, as “[t]here is nothing worse for the sick than to come across doctors who, instead of having made profound studies in divine science, have entertained themselves writing verses and falling in love with girls” (1852, p. 182). An attack that, as in the case of Cardenas, concerns both the lack of individual ethics and the deficiencies of the institutions that train doctors. Also, like Cárdenas, Millán denounces the existence of monopolies established by old generations of doctors that prevent the modernization of the field. Yet, he moves beyond into suggesting that these monopolies give rise to a culture of patronage that perpetuates traditional medical doctrines, for “the doctor who does not order blood to be drawn and does not employ leeches and suckers is not worthy to be part of the guild of the faculty” (Millán, 1852, pp. 182-183).

The narrator satirizes then the various advertising strategies used by doctors to build up their reputation and attract customers. He mocks the change in “habits, character, and physiognomy” that doctors experience after graduating from the university: “[The doctor] turns serious, spends little time talking, appears to be always meditating about the countless diseases that afflict humanity... many start wearing glasses despite having a lynx's vision” (Millán, 1852, p. 184). But even more important for the doctors than character and

appearance, suggests the narrator, “is to make themselves known, because no one wants to meet unknown doctors” (Millán, 1852, p. 186). Hence, they use propaganda such as the pompous and misleading ads about their virtues and achievements that they elaborate and publish with help of “some complacent poet” (Millán, 1852, p. 186). A burlesque attack on the figure of the Cuban doctor that simultaneously alludes to the lack of ethics in writers who lend themselves to scripting advertisements in exchange for economic remuneration. Thus, doctors, writers, and the press of the time appear as connected gears of the modern capitalist system settling on the island.

Towards the end of the text, Millán compares the figure of the doctor to that of another member of what Rama called the *ciudad letrada*: the lawyer. He inserts a conversation between a lawyer and an illiterate peasant where the former refuses to represent the latter due to lack of economic solvency.^{xi} For, “to engage in dispute”, cries the lawyer, “it is necessary to have at least for the necessary expenses” (Millán 1852, p. 190). Such digression also records—from a different approach—the lack of ethics as a corollary of the crude consummation of modern capitalism on the island as well as another phenomenon that arrived with the Cuban modernization process: the integration of professional services—such as law—into the functioning of the State and its impact on the Cuban population.^{xii}

The lithograph that accompanies the text, by Víctor Patricio de Landaluze, rather than being a visual continuity of the morally degraded characters described by Millán, is intended to depict an ideal Cuban doctor. One sees a middle-aged man who stands erect, facing away from the viewer, and dressed up in a sober but elegant manner. He wears white pants without clips and a tight black *frac*. He also wears black shoes with a small heel, a black silk hat, and he carries on his right hand a walking stick with which he rests on the ground. In its entirety, the clothing of this character indicates conformity to European fashion of the time. Contrary to this, the illustrated figure presents visible mulatto features, such as fleshy lips, a wide nose, dark

curly hair, and a thick beard. It presents, to put it in other words, a physical appearance that contains and projects a critique of the colonial regime, where, as said before, slavery was still in effect and the study and practice of medicine was exclusive to Spanish men and their creole descendants. Concurrently, one could say, the image projects a sense of collective identity unique to the island—born out of the mixture of its races—and disassociated from Spain.



Figure 1. Víctor Patricio de Landaluze, “El médico”.
From *Los cubanos pintados por sí mismos*.
Imprenta y Papelería de Barcina.

“La vieja curandera” (1881)

Many things changed in the Cuban socio-political panorama during the nearly three decades that passed between the publication of Millán’s “El médico” in 1852 and the publication of Francisco de Paula Gelabert’s (1834-1894) “La vieja curandera” in 1881. For one thing, the *Guerra de los diez años* (1868-1878), the first independence movement on the island, gave rise to a series of reforms within the colonial system. Among these, the easing of censorship of the press, which in turn resulted in an editorial boom that facilitated the proliferation of *costumbrista* anthologies such as *Tipos y costumbres de la isla de Cuba*, which included eleven articles by De Paula Gelabert, being “La vieja curandera” one of them.

During this same period of time, scientific disciplines interested in social issues made considerable progress as the authoritative language of such topics. Extensive

anthropological and sociological studies on race and national identity were published, e.g. Henry Joseph Dumont's *Antropología y patología comparadas de los negros esclavos* (1876). Also, in 1877 the colonial regime allowed the establishment of the Sociedad Antropológica de la Isla de Cuba, which published numerous studies concerning the sociocultural configuration of different regions of the island. Altogether, suggests Domínguez, gave rise to a sort of dispute among scholars over the discursive hegemony of Cuba's sociocultural field, where literature was beginning to give way to the so-called social sciences (2016, p. 143). In the face of this, *costumbristas* sought to counterbalance the influence of the social sciences and to further advocate for the civic and pedagogical value of their literature.

In general terms, “La vieja curandera” is yet another attempt by an author to persuade readers to abandon traditions based on intersubjective myths and superstitions—located once again in the figure of the old healer—in the name of enlightened science. Yet, the article also registers the mentioned sociocultural changes that had taken place on the island up until the end of the century. It opens with a brief commentary that fully reflects both, the author's rational interpretation of things and the greater degree of freedom of speech enjoyed by local writers: “Credulity or blind faith has always been of great help in this world for all those tricksters who have exploited the candor and simplicity of the majority of people... And in vain is science progressing” (De Paula Gelabert 1881, p. 229). In view of this, and in the eagerness to situate the *costumbrista* literature as an authorized discourse to draw up theses on the social aspects of the island, De Paula Gelabert proposes to appeal to literary tools intrinsic to *costumbrista* literature for he believes them to be the only devices that can stop the social evils that prevent Cuba from entering modernity: “That is the reason why severe criticism, biting satire, mockery in all its manifestations, is the only thing that can stop this generalized tendency of giving credit to what offers an illusory, marvelous, and fantastic character” (De Paula Gelabert 1881, p. 229).

The rest of article develops as a supposedly improvised story through which De Paula Gelabert pretends to exemplify his initial assertions. It tells of the life of Amparo del Apazote y Malvabisco, an old female healer whose ridiculous name—made up of herbal terms—sets off the critical parody the author will make of this character afterwards. As is the case of the old female healers in Betancourt's *cuadro*, De Paula Gelabert's healer is the prototype of ignorant lower-class women who cure and solve all sorts of problems—of other equally ignorant individuals—with traditional medicine and Christian prayers. The story has a simple structure, consisting of a sequence of short dialogues between the healer and her clients, where they—one by one—present before her the problems that afflict them. Whether physical or emotional sufferings, “the old healer had a specific [remedy] for everything”, asserts the narrator in irony (De Paula Gelabert 1881, p. 230). Thereafter, the narrator only intervenes between scenes with brief comments condemning the actions of the old healer and those of her clients. These comments ensure a clear transmission of his message through the use of derogatory adjectives, for he describes the healer as “miserable” and “a lying witch”, and the clients as “uneducated and ignorant people” (De Paula Gelabert 1881, p. 230-232). To evade the harms caused by healers, he encourages the clients “to turn to the aid of the medical science” (De Paula Gelabert 1881, p. 235). He also speaks of the need of a “solid education” in Cuba, for only education works as a “remedy against fanaticism and superstition” (De Paula Gelabert 1881, p. 235).

The lithograph that accompanies the text—also by Víctor Patricio de Landaluz—is in this case in full correspondence with De Paula Gelabert's narrative. One sees an old woman standing sideways. She has pale complexion and gray hair, rough facial features and a masculinized body. She wears a checkered shawl over her shoulders and a simple light dress, which covers her entire body except for her arms. In her hands she holds herbs with which she prepares a potion, while with her mouth she holds a smoky cigar that contributes to her rough appearance and

alludes to the healer's decadence and dishonesty.



Figure 2. Víctor Patricio de Landaluze, "La vieja curandera." From *Tipos y costumbres de la isla de Cuba*. Miguel de Villa.

Conclusion

On many occasions *costumbrismo* has served as the most effective term used to disqualify tendencies that can be linked to the world of literary nationalism. Even those who have dedicated themselves to the study of the genre occasionally refer to *costumbrismo*—and sometimes with reason—as “a modality that is not characterized by its outstanding stylistic merits” (Bueno 1985, p. IX); or *costumbrismo*'s achievements are ironically dismissed: “From the point of view, the role of the costumbrismo was, so to speak, much more municipal than national” (Cornejo Polar 1989, p. 31). Yet, as Lasarte Varcárcel pointed out, “although on *costumbrismo* carries along the ghost of its inferiority, of its immediacy and irrelevance [*vis a vis* other literary genres], it will be difficult to question the importance that it acquired in the constitution of the cultural field during the formation of the Latin American nations or the significance that it has for the understanding of that epoch” (1997, p. 175).

In the decades prior to achieving independence from Spanish colonial power, Cuban *letrados* developed their first discursive representations of the island's social corpus in the form of *cuadros de costumbres*. These, as we have seen, were not only meant to mold the imagination of a future independent nation

state, but also to make implementation of modernization on the island assimilable. Expressly, typologization of society, which characterize *cuadros de costumbres*, would function as a device of representation to impose an order on the assumed chaos caused by the clash between local traditions and the modernity coming from abroad. In such capacity, they also encourage the emergence of a public zone of reflection on the populations that the authors thought constituted a problem for the paradigm of the modern nation. In the meantime, emerges also the perspective of these very same authors as a device of arbitration and organization that uses the rational enlightened thought as a framework of authority. Their works become then useful and progressive poetic pieces through which the reader becomes acquainted with the “proper” coordinates of conduct to navigate towards the longed-for future modern nation.

The *cuadros de costumbres* that we have analyzed in this study clearly reflect such anxiety of Cuban *costumbristas* for synchronizing the nation with modern European civilization, for documenting the difficulties that such a task entailed, and for justifying the social role of literature in a nation that was increasingly affected by the changes brought about by such a modernization process. Doctors, old healers, writers, and the rest of the characters in the works by Betancourt, Cárdenas, Millán, and De Paula Gelabert are thus more than just picturesque types representative of the sociocultural composition of the island, for they document in their concomitance a complex social field, in which traditional practices—medical and non-medical—abruptly collided with the new practices that were emerging and decidedly transforming Cuba.

Notes

- ⁱSee Losada (2014, pp. 333-346); Schwab (2018, pp. 218-221); and Pérez Salas (1998, pp. 167-190).
- ⁱⁱ Most direct citations in this article were translated from Spanish to English by the author. In some cases, the original citations in English are provided.
- ⁱⁱⁱThe easing of political censorship, new papermaking and printing technologies, and changes in reading practices, fostered an explosion in a wide variety of printed products in 19th century Europe, among them, articles on the customs and the manners of society. See Schwab (2018, pp. 204-232); Mainardi (2017, pp. 34-48); Requate, (2009, pp. 30-42); and Boening (2004, pp. 285-301).
- ^{iv} See Hamnett (2011, p. 14); Pérez Salas (1998, p. 180); and Watson-Espener (1979, p. 53).
- ^v See Coffey (2016, pp. 139-150); Bueno (1985, pp. XIII-XXIX).
- ^{vi} As in 1861, 80% of the island's population was illiterate. See Mégevand (2002, p. 9).
- ^{vii} For more on the status of the medical field in Cuba during colonial times, see López Denis (2003, pp. 11- 33). Also see Fuentes Lafargues (2011, pp. 87-112).
- ^{viii} The mention of Cham in this passage is a reference to Ham, the biblical character—cursed by Noah in Genesis 9—that during colonial times became a base myth for the collective degradation and enslavement of dark-skinned people in the Americas.
- ^{ix} See Sarmiento (2003).
- ^x I take here the definition of modern capitalism outlined by M. Weber, for whom the most general premise for the existence of modern capitalism was the rational capital accounting as the norm for all profitmaking enterprises concerned with the satisfaction of everyday needs. See Weber (1966, p. 208).
- ^{xi} Rama uses the term *ciudad letrada* (lettered city) to refer to the urban origin of Latin American *letrados*

(university graduates) during colonial times. See Rama (2002).

^{xii} By 1852, year in which Millán published "El médico", the Collage of Law was founded in Havana.

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