A Female Conquistador: The Contradictions of Colonial Discourse in the Countess of Merlin's Viaje a La Habana

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A Female Conquistador: The Contradictions of Colonial Discourse in the Countess of Merlin's Viaje a La Habana

Abstract

Follow me, dear viscountess, you whose originality has not lost any of its freshness and grace among Parisian elegance and the demands of the civilised life. Come to an unknown and remarkable place to behold the spectacle of customs that have never been described, nor hardly observed. Our hopes have not been sufficiently extinguished that they are not awakened anew by the sight of beings which still maintain all the charm of primitive society. (Merlin 1844b, 59)
Follow me, dear viscountess, you whose originality has not lost any of its freshness and grace among Parisian elegance and the demands of the civilized life. Come to an unknown and remarkable place to behold the spectacle of customs that have never been described, nor hardly observed. Our hopes have not been sufficiently extinguished that they are not awakened anew by the sight of beings which still maintain all the charm of primitive society. (Merlin 1844b, 59)

With these words, the Countess of Merlin invites her European audience to come, metaphorically through her writing, to the 'unknown' and 'primitive' world that was Cuba in 1844. This primitive world was in fact the countess's place of birth, which she travelled back to after a long absence and about which she wrote her travelogue *Viaje a La Habana* (1844b). Although born in Cuba, Merlin resided in Europe for most of her life, which possibly accounts for her exclusion from the Cuban literary canon. Moreover, since her exile also prevented her from having a voice as a Latin American author, Merlin ultimately shares the lack of visibility that is characteristic of other Latin American women writers of the nineteenth century.

In the area of travel writing this invisibility is accentuated by the lack of studies on Latin American women travel writers. Current research on women's travel writing mostly focuses on the large number of travel writers from Europe and the United States. The travel writinganalysed in Latin America focuses either on writing by foreigners who travelled to this geographical area or on writing by men who travelled to Europe and the United States. Since Latin American women travel writers remain largely unknown, this study on the Countess of Merlin and her text, *Viaje a La Habana*, is part of a larger project, which looks at travel writing by Latin American women in the nineteenth century.
Contrary to what may be expected, there were many Latin American women who travelled and who wrote travel accounts during the nineteenth century. These were educated, upper-class women who travelled to other Latin American countries, to Europe and to the United States. Sometimes they travelled to accompany a husband, or a father on a diplomatic or work mission, as did the Mexican sisters, Enriqueta and Ernestina Larrainzar, who travelled with their father all over Europe and produced a monumental five-volume account of their voyage (1880). At other times women travelled for leisure or for their own work as did Aurelia Castillo de González, for example, a Cuban journalist who travelled in 1889 to report on the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1891). On her way to Chicago in 1893 to document that exhibition, she travelled first to Mexico and wrote about this experience as well (1895). Another writer was the Colombian, Soledad Acosta de Samper, the most important female intellectual in her country at that time, whose countless writings include a travel book, *Viaje a España en 1892* (1894). The Argentinian, Juana Manuela Gorriti, spent her life writing and travelling between Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Chile. Though she did not write a book-length travel account, her extensive work includes some *impressiones de viajes* or travel impressions (1878).

These are just a few of the Latin American women writers who have written travel accounts and who, like the Countess of Merlin, the subject of this article, deserve critical attention. Latin American women travel writers have remained voiceless in the area of research on nineteenth-century travel writing, but the study of these writers and their works enables us to better understand the role of women in nineteenth-century Latin America. This research, like the research on European nineteenth-century travel writing, reveals strategies of colonialism, as they affect Latin American women, as well as the historical processes by which they participated, actively or passively, in the colonial enterprise of that century.

**The Countess: Stranger in a Strange Land**

In the second letter of *Viaje a La Habana*, the Countess of Merlin wrote, ‘My heart is oppressed ... to think I come here as a stranger’ (10). She was fifty-one years old when she wrote her travelogue and was indeed a stranger in her native land. Merlin visited Cuba at that age after being absent from the island for close to forty years. She had left Cuba when she was a child and had lived in Europe all her adult life. Her two-month stay in the island could have hardly relieved her feeling of alienation. As much as she wanted to identify with Cuba, which she calls her *patria*, or fatherland, throughout the text, the truth is that she felt like a foreigner and that her compatriots regarded her as one also.

At the time of her voyage to Cuba, Merlin enjoyed some acceptance from the Del Monte group, a literary society made up of the island’s prominent intellectuals who sought reforms for the island. Some members of this group however, were suspicious of the social class she represented, the powerful saccharocracy, since
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The Countess of Merlin. (Photo: courtesy of Dr. Jorge Yviricu)

this class was the focal point of their resistance (Aratijo 113). A member of the literary group, Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel, wrote a series of articles attacking Merlin for 'seeing the island of Cuba with Parisian eyes' (Méndez 1990, 711). This critical reception of Merlin was further complicated by the fact that she used several costumbrista, or local colour sketches, written by Cuban authors without giving them credit in *Viaje a La Habana*. Tanco y Bosmeniel was the first critic to denounce Merlin for her plagiarism as well as for her foreignness.

Adriana Méndez Rodenas, who has researched Merlin extensively, argues that the countess has been excluded from Cuban literary history because she was a woman (1990 710), but her 'foreignness', her absence from the island and the fact that she wrote in French, also contributed to this lack of recognition. Even
some critics in the twentieth century were still reluctant to include Merlin as a Cuban author. For example, José Antonio Portuondo fails to mention Merlin in his work on Cuban literature (1960). Those critics who do mention her in their critical works continue to highlight her dubious adaptation of the costumbrista and her Frenchness. Two examples of this are Max Henríquez Ureña in his *Panorama histórico de la literatura cubana* (1963) and Salvador Bueno in his essay ‘Una escritora habanera de expresión francesa’ (1977).

Recently the Countess of Merlin and her work have awakened new interest among academics and researchers who are focusing on a number of different areas of study, from the biographical to the literary. In Méndez’s approach, the countess is read as a feminist writer who subverts feminine codes of behaviour and who transgresses the male-dominated boundaries of literary production by writing historical essays (1986 76; 1990 725). Other analyses deal with Merlin’s autobiographical texts, with the genres of her texts, and with her political essays on slavery (Molloy 1991; Díaz 1994; Martin 1995). Whatever the approach, this new attention rescues Merlin from oblivion inasmuch as it acknowledges her voice and her participation in history.

To contribute to these studies, then, the purpose of this article is to produce an analysis of colonial discourse in *Viaje a La Habana*. Sara Mills argues that ‘[F]emales play an important part in the colonial enterprise as signifiers, but not as producers of signification’ (1991 59). Considering that Latin American women have been ignored in the analysis of colonial discourse, my intention is to show Merlin’s agency in the colonial discourse of her era. However, since the countess was a hybrid product of both Cuban and European culture, her colonial discourse is conflictive. In fact, this disjunction is very much evident throughout *Viaje a La Habana* since she is both the product and the producer of colonial signification.

**IN SEARCH OF LA COMTESSE MERLIN**

The Countess of Merlin was born Maria de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo in Havana in 1789 to one of the founding families of the Cuban sugar aristocracy (Méndez 1998, 20). Merlin’s parents migrated to Spain soon after her birth, leaving her in the care of her maternal grandmother. At the age of 12 she joined her family in Spain. She later married Antoine Christophe Merlin, a French general in José Bonaparte’s army, and became La Comtesse Merlin. After Bonaparte’s fall, she was forced to migrate once again, leaving Spain for France, with her husband and firstborn daughter. In Paris, during the 1830s and 1840s, the countess became famous for housing a literary salon (Araújo 114). She lived in Paris until her death in 1852.

In 1840, a year after her husband’s death, the Countess of Merlin travelled back to Cuba to resolve a dispute with her brother over the sale of the family’s sugar mill at Nazareno. (It was resolved against the Countess’s interests [Méndez 1990, 727]). Upon Merlin’s return to Paris, she wrote *La Havane* (1844a), a
three-volume text in epistolary form, which is part travelogue, part political treatise and includes some historical writing. The political and historical material of this text was omitted in the Spanish edition, leaving *Viaje a La Habana* with only ten letters of the original thirty-six (Méndez 1990, 710). From the analysis of these ten letters, it is evident that Merlin uses the colonial discourse that European imperialism employed to classify the non-European world, to portray Cuba and its people.

Both Sara Mills and Mary Louise Pratt have argued that colonial discourse is articulated in the imperial situation as a justification for intervention in the 'unknown' and 'non-civilised' world (Mills 1997; Pratt 1992). During the nineteenth century, the discourse of imperialism circulated among writers, artists, scientists, travellers and scholars, in fiction and non-fiction as well as in art. No clear distinction was made between 'observed or imagined reality', in other words, travellers 'drew not just on their actual observations, but on concepts, images, and quotations taken from fellow French or British writers, to describe and explain their experiences' (De Groot 101). De Groot notes that, '[a] Frenchman like Lamartine could characterise the people he saw on his visit to the provinces of the Ottoman Empire as “nations without territory, patrie, rights, laws or security ... waiting anxiously for the shelter” of European occupation' (98). Two of the writers mentioned in De Groot's study, Lamartine and Hugo, authors of *Voyage en Orient* (1835) and *Les Orientals* (1829) respectively (De Groot 125), frequented the Countess of Merlin's literary salon (Araújo 114). Consequently, Merlin was aware of the colonial discourse that was circulating during her lifetime and, although it portrays her place of birth unfavourably, she uses it extensively in her travelogue. According to Mills, colonial discourse should not be attributed to the individual author's beliefs alone but to the larger belief system of imperialism (1997 106). Since the nineteenth century was the era of Europe's high imperialism, Merlin participates in colonial discourse because it is the dominant discourse of both the salon and her social class.

Sara Mills argues that through the use of words such as 'primitive', 'medieval', and 'backward', colonial discourse places the colonised country in the distant past of Western progress (Mills 1997, 111). This situates the West as an ideal, a step further in a teleological conception of history. In this view, the act of describing people as 'savages', as sub-human, or as infants, is also part of a temporal differentiation which includes the use of negative terms, such as weak, idle, or dirty, to describe the native inhabitants of the non-Western world (Mills 1997, 114). Mills also notes that 'value-laden statements about the inhabitants of colonised countries were presented as “facts” against which there was little possibility of argument' and that the generalisations made about particular cultures 'made them less communities of individuals than an indistinguishable mass, about whom one could amass “knowledge” or which could be stereotyped' (1997 109).
In my analysis of *Viaje a La Habana*, I have found that the language of colonial discourse as described by Mills is a constant in Merlin’s descriptions of Cuba and its inhabitants. The strategies of colonial discourse which I have identified in Merlin’s text, distinctly place Cuba in a European past by ‘primitivising’ Cuba, ‘infantilising’ its inhabitants and ‘naturalising’ their alleged laziness. Merlin constantly compares Cuba to Europe, equating the former with primitiveness, inertia, neglect and laziness among other negative terms, and the latter with civilisation, energy, willpower, industriousness.

**Havana: City of the Middle Ages**

When Merlin arrives in Havana in 1840, she is surprised by ‘the strange appearance of this city of the Middle Ages, that has remained intact under the Tropics’ (13). The domestic life in this city ‘seems to renew the charm of the Golden Age’ (18). Cuba is, according to Merlin, trapped in a European past, both the Middle Ages and Spain’s Golden Age being European temporal terms. What follows then, in the logic of colonial discourse, is the need for Cuba to progress towards European civilisation. Throughout *Viaje a La Habana*, the reader is confronted with images of a primitive Cuba that needs Europe’s civilising mission.

Indeed, Merlin believes that it is Europe’s duty to civilise Cuba. In order for Europe to achieve this it must have knowledge about Cuba, knowledge which the countess wishes to provide in her travelogue. According to the Countess of Merlin, ‘...this country [is] hardly known in Europe, and that deserves more than just a token interest from statesmen and observers. We have here more natural wealth than wealth acquired by work and perseverance. Our fellow citizens lack stimuli and our monuments lack history’ (31). Since her fellow citizens lack the stimuli necessary to exploit such natural wealth, Merlin invites Europeans to come, observe and produce knowledge about the island in order to exploit those under-used resources. Mills notes that the process of describing a country, its landscape and its inhabitants, is not an innocent act of producing knowledge for its own sake but is inflected by the relations of power in the colonial context (1997 115). This knowledge which has been produced about America by the *conquistadores*, the chroniclers, the scientists and the travellers since the conquest, is also the type of knowledge that Merlin’s text generates for the purpose of ‘civilising’ Cuba.

Occasionally, Merlin assumes a masculine authoritative voice to portray the Cuban landscape and thus reproduces the voice of the conquistadors. For instance, she describes the island as ‘virginal’ and claims that it is covered in ‘virginal forests’ (3). She greatly admires the men who “discovered” Cuba and dedicates a two-page homage to Christopher Columbus in which she likens him to a god (58–59). Upon her arrival she exclaims, ‘... I think I see the shadows of those great warriors, of those men of willpower and energy, Columbus’ and Velazquez’ companions, I think I see them proud of their most beautiful discovery bending from gratitude to the ocean, and thanking it for such a magnificent gift’ (3). Those
European men are the opposite of the natives of Cuba; while they have willpower and energy to conquer, the natives lack the stimulus to work the land. With this comment, moreover, Merlin reduces the conquest to a mere gift from nature to Europe, a gift, she seems to say, that these ‘great warriors’ rightfully deserved as a reward for their willpower and energy.

Merlin also wishes to ‘discover’ this virginal land, to observe it, to describe it, and to make it known to Europeans. By constantly referring to the natural resources that are under-utilised and emphasising the island’s potential for colonial exploitation, she is extending this invitation like ‘a travel brochure to lure Europeans to invest and work in the island’ (Martin 43). Merlin’s invitation to capitalist exploitation of the island is justified through colonial discourse, which is signified principally by the laziness of the native inhabitants.

**Evil Under the Sun: The Tropics and Laziness**

In Merlin’s discourse all the inhabitants of Cuba are not equal and there are obvious distinctions between one class and another. The countess belongs to the top of the Cuban social hierarchy, which in the 1840s is the landowning aristocracy whose wealth is based on the sugar plantation and slavery. This social class is very proud of its lineage since it comes directly from Spain or from Spanish descent. This is the only section of the Cuban population to which Merlin grants the status of ‘civilised’ as indicated in her use of positive adjectives. She claims, for example, that the youth in her own family have ‘fine features, expressive gaze and noble manners’ and adds, ‘you could notice an air of refinement and delicacy in all of them’ (12).

In contrast, the rest of Cuban society is described in negative terms. This includes the middle class which is composed of the less wealthy Creoles and the merchants, followed by the lower classes which consist of mestizos, mulattos, freed slaves and slaves. The stereotypical descriptions of the inhabitants of Cuba that Merlin’s text reproduces replicate the schema of European colonial discourse. For the countess, Cuban people evoke the quintessential image of the ‘noble savage’. They are mostly good, warm, passionate, and innocent, but idle and neglectful. She is surprised, for example, at how naively they give her gold, as if it were a fruit (18). This lack of recognition of the value of gold further indicates to Merlin, the ‘primitiveness’ of their pre-capitalist society. This opposition, between the civilised Europeans and the primitive Cubans, is mentioned again in Letter VI, entitled Los Guagiros, which is devoted to the Cuban country folk. She writes:

The people of the country, here named guajiros or monteros, have an eccentric nature that distinguishes them from those of other countries. They are fond of singing, pleasure and adventures, they divide their life between love and knightly prowess, and they could have figured in the court of Francis I as well as in these primitive cabins, if their indomitable passion for independence had not destined them first to the savage life
rather than to the yoke of civilisation. Their material life, simple and rustic, agrees with their poetic life, and this combination is exactly what gives their action a romantic and original mark. (34)

This letter reads more like a work of chivalric literature whose central character is a knight-errant searching for adventure, similar to the stories of Lancelot, Tristram or Amadis of Gaul, than an observation of country life. For example, Merlin’s claim that the *guajiro* loves his horse and his machete almost as much as his beloved (39) reminds the reader of a mounted knight with sword in hand courting a damsel. In fact, Merlin’s description is an adaptation of the work, *El Guajiro*, by the Cuban writer Cirilo Villaverde (Méndez 1990, 712) and it is clear that she did not observe the *guajiro* lifestyle herself. Moreover, her use of the words ‘primitive’, ‘rustic’ and ‘simple’, as well as the reference to Francis I, king of France during the early sixteenth century, again situate the country folk in a distant European past. The country folk of Cuba are for Merlin the other, that being a primitive and outgrown version of her European self. The same is true of the black slaves who appear infantile and, according to Merlin, are dependent on their masters, and hence on the very institution of slavery, for survival.

Although in *Viaje a La Habana*, Merlin does not write on the subject of slavery directly, she does describe the slaves on several occasions and, as with the *guajiro*, they are also stereotyped. Merlin constantly uses possessives and diminutives such as ‘mi negrito’ [my little black man] (55), and ‘mi negrilla’ [my little black woman] (27) to name the slaves. Her paternalistic attitude towards the slaves presents them as always happy; happy to serve and to be slaves. This is evident on her arrival when she is greeted by ‘semi-nude Negroes, that drive countless small boats, and scream, smoke, and show us their teeth as a sign of happiness to welcome us’ and later when the black men and the mulattos ‘sweat with the heat and yet they are all ready and serviceable’ (11). This is an ironic claim in view of the fact that the slaves run away and that they are hunted down by dogs especially bred for this job (24).

The portrayal of the slaves as ready and serviceable is incongruous with other depictions of them. For example, Merlin describes an aunt as a ‘saintly woman’ who never scolds her slaves, ‘instead she allows them to be lazy and negligent; so that, except at mealtimes, you can find her Negro women lying on the floor all day singing, talking and combing each other’ (17). The slaves are infantilised in this description; just like children, they lie all day on the floor singing, talking and combing each other. Since they work very little, only at meal times, they are also represented as lazy and negligent. Merlin’s text is fractured by these discursive contradictions: the slaves are content to be slaves, but they run away; they are serviceable but are also lazy; the masters are benevolent but they hunt their run-away slaves as animals.

Even in the instances when the countess attempts a humane and compassionate representation of the slaves, she inadvertently achieves the contrary effect. When
Merlin plays the piano all the black women in the house become her audience, an audience she appreciates: ‘[y]ou will say that it is the most stupid audience in the world; but nevertheless I am honoured, and their gestures and pure demonstrations are like no other. The Negroes love music with a passion, and they have songs which they sing with an interesting simplicity’ (28). She tries to describe them in a favourable way; they, like the countess,7 love music but since they are stupid they can only love it by instinct not through a real understanding of music. The guajiros’s music culture is similarly described: their dance is ‘simple’ yet ‘passionate’, as are their lives, and their music ‘lacks major and minor chords’ (39). Although the countess can appreciate the primitive efforts at making music of both the slaves and the guajiros, to her their music lacks the sophistication of European music.

In addition to the guajiros and the slaves, the merchant middle class, which consisted of Spaniards that migrated to Cuba, is also portrayed negatively. Merlin notes that although the merchants ‘arrive without patrimony to the island, they end up making great fortunes; they begin to prosper by their industriousness and saving, and end up taking possession of the most beautiful inherited patrimonies, because of the high interest they charge to lend their money’ (30). Since this class appropriates the wealth of the aristocracy and is thus a threat to it, Merlin declares it immoral: ‘I cannot believe that good can come of immorality’ (31). The disjunctiveness of Merlin’s discourse is evident here for, having described the industriousness of the merchant class, she then goes on to claim they are immoral and lazy. On business transactions in Havana, for example, she states, ‘[t]o avoid an extra step, an extra word, an extra signature, there is always an excuse, there is always a pretext, there is always a tomorrow. The sun, an implacable sun, is perpetually getting between you and your agents, between your agents and your business’ (19). The inhabitants’ laziness is ascribed to the effects of the ‘implacable sun’. They are lazy and immoral and yet they are unable to control their own actions since it is nature that renders them immobile and incapable.

Nature plays an important role in Merlin’s discourse, not the nature she observed, but the idea of America’s primal nature. Although it was circulating during the countess’s lifetime through the writings of travellers, writers and scientists such as Humboldt (Pratt 120–29), this idea originated earlier, during the second half of the eighteenth century. In what is called the ‘dispute of the New World’, European scientists such as Buffon, De Pauw and Robertson argued that the new world was a humid, degenerating environment not only geologically but botanically and humanly (Pagden 76–81). These scientists claimed that ‘the Americas were, by their very nature, incapable of producing anything of lasting cultural value, that any New World culture whether autochthonous or transplanted must be inferior to the cultures of the Old World’ (Pagden 76). Through this scientific discourse Europe confirmed that the inhabitants of America were degenerate by nature. Using the same apparatus, Merlin naturalises the laziness
of the Cuban inhabitants, though with the notable exception of her own class. She presents a picture of idleness and inertia when she describes the habanero, or inhabitant, of Havana whose 'passionate soul' only thinks of the present, and never of the future.

Laziness and negligence weaken his will. Just as the blood concentrated by the heat of the atmosphere flees from the surface of his skin, and takes refuge in the depth of his veins giving him that innate and characteristic paleness of the inhabitants of the Tropics, so his will, weakened by neglect and his indifference, does not awaken again in him except by the force of great passions or great needs. (34)

The negative language is persistent: laziness, negligence, weak will power, and indifference. This is a language which describes the innate characteristics of the habanero. The heat of the atmosphere, the surface of his skin, the depth of his veins: his primitivism and his laziness reside in his body and are derived from nature and that is why, according to Merlin, he needs Europe to further his progress toward civilisation.

Merlin describes Cuba as a ‘marvellous land’ where anything can happen (33) and the Cuban landscape as ‘an enchanted world’ (21) where one raindrop can almost fill a glass (47), and where trees are so full of fruit they bend with their weight (69). Although Merlin frequently praises Cuba’s exuberant nature, the island remains at a disadvantage: it is an exotic paradise incapable of producing art, history or anything that represents civilisation:

Cuba lacks the poetry of memories; its echoes only repeat the poetry of hope. Its buildings have no history. The inhabitant of Havana lives in the present and in future time; his imagination and his soul only move before the wonderful nature that surrounds him; his palaces are the gigantic clouds that kiss the sun at dusk; his arc de triomphe is the sky: instead of obelisks he has palm trees; instead of feudal escutcheons he has the shining feather of the macaw, and instead of paintings by Murillo and Rafael he has the dark eyes of his women.... (56)

Merlin juxtaposes the wonders of European civilisation — the palaces, the Arc de Triomphe, the obelisks, the artists — to Cuban nature. These monuments are the symbols of civilisation, which Cuba lacks. For Merlin, ‘Cuba has no history’ (31), nor does it have any art as she demonstrates in her description of the cathedral of Havana: ‘its semi-Spanish and semi-classical architecture has no style and no antiquity. It is a mixed type composed of the Arab, the Gothic and even the primitive Mexican, that like all the works of art in infant peoples is an imitation of nature’ (55). Because Cuba is only a child, it cannot produce any sophisticated art, or music for that matter; it can only imitate the mature art of Europe, the parent. It’s imitation is so artless that it ‘vividly wounds the imagination’ (56) of a European woman such as Merlin, who is so accustomed to the refinement of civilisation.

In sum, the Countess of Merlin views Cuba, its inhabitants and its culture as primitive. To her, this characteristic is innate and it is explained by primal nature.
Apart from idleness and negligence, nature also produces passion and sensuality (70), morbidness and voluptuosity in the Cubans (107). Merlin’s use of words such as morbid, negligent, simple, sensual, lazy, immoral, ardent, primitive, rustic and weak contrasts with her depiction of energetic and civilised Europe. This opposition between the geographical/cultural space of Europe and Cuba is comparable to the opposition between mind and matter:

Human beings (especially men) appropriated nature in this period [the nineteenth century], and the appropriation was a consequence of the hypothesis of a dualism of mind and matter. In this dualism, however, rationality became a supreme value and a value associated exclusively with men. Women by contrast were consigned to the matter part of the dichotomy, along with beasts of nature, and members of the working classes and other races. (Mendus and Rendall 8)

Europe is rationality: Europe is civilisation; it has history and art, and it is male. Cuba, on the other hand, is sensual, passionate, and idle; it has primal nature and no history or art. Cuba is the female receptor of the civilisation that masculine Europe wants to bring to it. Cuba, like the rest of America, is also the gift that nature has given Europe.

**Conclusion**

Merlin inhabits a paradoxical position between her colonial discourse and her desire to recover, in the two short months of her visit to Cuba and through her text, the lost patria that she recognises as her own. The opposition between Europe and Cuba that she so carefully presents — civilisation and savagery, mind and matter, male and female — situates her patria, as well as her gender, in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the masculine imperial power of her era. Although I agree with some scholars that the Countess of Merlin challenged masculine codes of behaviour in as much as the acts of writing and travelling were a subversion of the limited roles allowed women, it is also evident that Merlin followed the conventions of the colonial discourse of her time. She was in an anomalous position — that of a female conquistador, a civilised savage or a colonising colonial subject. These oxymorons reveal the conjunctions and disjunctions of the hybrid space, which she inhabited.

At this point, I would return to the quotation that opens this essay: ‘Follow me, dear viscountess...behold the spectacle...of primitive society’ (59). Merlin’s audience is a viscountess, a Parisian woman, elegant, graceful and, of course, civilised. Merlin also has a noble title, thus, being a countess herself she identifies with this woman. She also shares the characteristics of elegance and gracefulness. The Countess of Merlin wants the viscountess, to whom she addresses her letter, and the rest of her European audience, to identify her as also civilised. Yet Merlin also acknowledges and asks for recognition of her ‘primitive’ place of birth by the very act of writing about it. She is herself from this ‘unknown’ and ‘remarkable’ place whose customs have never been described or observed — that is, observed
by Europeans. If the Countess of Merlin is European because of her title and her place of residence, she is also Cuban by birth and, it would seem, by inclination. The spectacle that Merlin exhibits through her text is not just the ‘primitive society’ to which she belongs, for the spectacle that Merlin displays is her own ambiguous place in literary history. She is both spectator and spectacle. Though she may have had some success during her lifetime because of her class and her literary salon, neither Cuba nor France would claim her as their literary daughter. Consequently Merlin has been consigned to oblivion — a literary exile — from which this essay attempts to retrieve her.

NOTES
1 All references are from *Viaje a La Habana* and translations from the Spanish original are my own.
2 See Adriana Méndez Rodenas 1986, 96.
3 See Adriana Méndez Rodenas 1986, 96.
4 See Adriana Méndez Rodenas 1998, pp. 292–99, for a detailed bibliography of Merlin's works and of past and current studies on her life and works.
6 Sylvia Molloy notes that the countess was a reader and admirer of Rousseau, p. 87.
7 The Countess of Merlin studied music when she arrived in Europe as a youth. She wrote musical compositions as well as sung in operas. See Méndez 1998, p. 23.

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Chris MacMahon

TEA AT HLAMBEZA POOL

The pool is as you’d imagine it to be: brown and narrow, mirroring cycads and ferns, the crags of a deep ravine. Spined succulents thicket the banks, the pleated rocks and surface shales.

We are much as you would picture us, sprawled on rugs with thermos flasks, discussing new software and hardware, exchanging stories of burn-out, stress, armed robbery and patients with AIDS.

‘A green cathedral,’ chirps someone, smacking at horseflies and miggies. The children pick through the rushes and clambering onto adult shoulders leap out with shrieks into the pool.

‘What’s this?’ Bobbing along an edge, roofed in by naves of ferns and reeds, three fist-sized crumplings of paper, pumpkin seeds in the boat of the one, white beads and tobacco in the others.

‘Offerings,’ says a friend, ‘you know, like Greeks and Romans used to make. Not to gods, to the people of the river, the ancestors which Xhosa locals claim are intercessors, their links with God.’

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t have swum here.’ The words reverberate across a silence. I feel the cycad fronding of the unknown breaking out around and inside us again, then glimpse deep in a pool of memory the faces of the living-dead, the shades.
THE MIGRANT SHUTTLE

Year end, a Durban evening without rain.
Beneath a gloom of orange street-lights
a taxi-rank with people waiting in groups,
the aroma of spilt beer and car-exhausts,
cigarettes, urine and meat roasting on fires,
the *doemp-doemp-doemp* of rap from a car.

You board an old bus, its migrant shuttle.  
*Trust Nobody* says the sign in the back. 
You leave behind in the bins and gutters
a Christmas decor of peeled egg-shells,
chicken-bones, mango and orange skins
and crushed-in cartons of pineapple beer.

MaZama, a cleaner at Shoprite Checkers,
dozing off, breastfeeds her child to sleep.  
She has her wages cached in her bodice
and warm nuggets of vetkoek in her bag. 
Bheki Khumalo, who married her cousin,
lifts a brown paper packet to his mouth.

The bus passes factories, billboards, tolls,
grinding on beneath the stars of the hunter
through cane-fields towards an umbilicus,
a cluster of earth-walled shacks on a hill. 
You check the sweets and radio in a bag
and yearn to touch the body of your wife.

The road’s a circuit, a two-way pilgrimage.
At one end’s a family hungry in the fields,
the scent of a herb burnt for the ancestors,
the molten sugar-cane smell from the mill.
The other’s a dream of groceries, a car,
money in the bank and a home with taps.
WORDING THE GAP

A landscape of aloes and thorns,
the post office's hot iron stoep.

Two fellow teachers from the school,
having sat beside you on the bench,

are reading a gloss-faced postcard
sent by a friend studying abroad.

First they in an English collage
then you in minimalist Xhosa

struggle to express a response
to water lilies, a bridge, a stream.

A pause, a silence like a kloof
suddenly chasms apart our talk.

I sense the borders of wordscapes,
a still unpainted, unsayable land.

Words — how they undo and make us,
as much the frontier as the pioneer.
UNVEILING A SHADE

The scene registers: a hilltop plot of grass, cleared and fenced, choirboys in cassocks, a priest with glasses, then Thisha Ngcobo standing at a tombstone veiled with a sheet.

That much the painting before me evokes.
A stippling of ink's the flint in the grave.
Pale floatings of colour, textures of light turn into fawn grass, a blue KwaZulu sky.

It looks so real. Thorn-trees and rondavels, the tense, sombre look on the teacher's face cross over a then to now, a there to a here, with traces of clouds and barbs on the wires.

The art is in the omissions. The goats I saw straying into a neighbour's maize are gone. So have the friends that crowded the fence, a bus with balloons, thumping to a wedding.

Under the level flint, the coffined residue of Ngcobo's father lies. The grieving over, the money saved up to purchase the tomb, he's being returned, back home as a shade.

Dogs barking nearby, the ads from radios, the prayers and hymns have leached away. He like the painting has now turned into a clustering of hints, a presence of clues.