

The Antislavery Discourse in the *Autobiography* (1840) of Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1853), and the Novel *Sab* (1841) by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814-73)

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Antislavery literature in Cuba experienced its major peak during the first half of the nineteenth century with the works of the well-known “círculodelmontino” led by the writer and progressive lawyer, Domingo del Monte. Joining this group were liberal thinkers, mostly from the Cuban bourgeoisie, who contributed to the creation of an abolitionist and emancipating the program essential for the total liberation of Cuban slaves in 1886. There were several works with this antislavery motif that were written by individuals who frequented said literary circle due to the requests made by Del Monte. Among the earliest works we find the famous novel by Anselmo Suárez y Romero, *Francisco*, written in 1839 and published in 1880; the *Escenas de la vida privada en la isla de Cuba* that Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel wrote in 1938, first published in 1925; and the *Autobiography* that Juan Francisco Manzano wrote in 1835 which was translated to English in 1840 and printed in Great Britain (Luis, *Literary Bondage 1*). These and other writings by attendees of “círculo delmontino,” as well as the novel *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, written between 1836 and 1839, published in Madrid in 1841 (Servera 46), present a subversive counter-discourse toward the norms established by the Spanish Crown, which began to fall apart around the same time.

In the case of Gómez de Avellaneda, although *Sab* is of Cuban origin, given that this is the author’s birthplace, the novel was narrated and published in Europe¹. It may be due to this

reason, and because she is female, that her antislavery discourse differs greatly from that of her Cuban peers, the majority of whom are males, who participated in the gatherings organized by Del Monte, which Gómez de Avellaneda was not able to attend. To show this disparity in the way of portraying Cuban slavery through literature during the first half of the nineteenth century, we intend to analyze two texts: the autobiography of a mulatto slave, Juan Francisco Manzano, who lived in his own skin the injustices of an oppressive system, and the novel *Sab* narrated from the perspective of a woman of Spanish descent who belonged to the upper class and was raised among slaves. The different nature of both the authors and the texts, with an antislavery position, leads us to compare the image of the Cuban slave portrayed in both texts, as well as the arguments used to give voice to the mulatto in a society filled with prejudices and privileges of race. Along with the differences found in both discourses subversive to the colonial system, what is also emphasized in the pages that follow are the different types of suffering to which the two central characters, a real one (Manzano) and a fictional one (*Sab*), were subjects under the slavery system.

We will also contrast the image of the slave

¹ According to Servera, it is very likely that the author concluded the writing of the novel in 1939, and although critics such as Raimundo Lazo believe that she began writing it before leaving the island, it is very likely that she started writing it on the ship on her way to Europe, in June of 1836 (Servera 46).

projected by both authors and how, in the case of *Sab*, the chains of the black slave are symbolically transferred to the limitations of the Cuban woman in a society patterned mainly by the white male.

Prior to analyzing these two works, it is important to mention certain biographical aspects of their respective authors. Since the most significant details of Juan Francisco Manzano are found in his own testimony, we will proceed to describe parts of his *Autobiography*, drawing from the introduction of the edition by William Luis. Born in La Habana, Cuba, in 1797, Manzano was a slave for forty years, being transferred from one owner to another. He was the son of María del Pilar Manzano, the favorite slave of Marquesa Jústiz de Santa Ana, and of the slave Toribio de Castro, but despite his enslavement, his first owner Marquesa Jústiz raised him as her own son, giving him a privileged childhood. When his owner died in 1803, Manzano was sent to another estate with Marquesa de Prado-Ameno, by whom he was subjected to perverse punishments that were disproportionate to his childhood mischievous behavior. It was in this new home where Manzano first noticed his status as a slave, despite being a domestic slave, a condition that could be considered a privilege to some extent. And it was also during this time period that he discovered and started developing new skills; for example, his skill as a writer, to the point of writing and reciting poems from memory. He was able to develop other artistic skills that were previously unknown to him. For example, due to his proficiency at sewing, he soon became the favorite slave in the household until 1817 when he was finally able to escape (Luis, "Cronología" 75). Around the year 1830, he met Domingo del Monte, who encouraged him to write his autobiography, which he did in 1835 (75). After spending a year in prison for his presumed involvement in the Conspiración de la Escalera, an antislavery movement in Cuba, Manzano was granted his freedom in 1845, the time when he stopped writing, and started to earn a living as a baker. Manzano died in

poverty in La Habana in 1853. Months later, Del Monte died while exiled in Madrid (75).

The creator of *Sab*, daughter of Captain Manuel Gómez de Avellaneda and Francisca de Arteaga y Betancourt, Gómez de Avellaneda was born in the Cuban city of Puerto Príncipe (currently Camagüey), in 1814 (Servera 12). Her father died when she was only eight years old. After remaining on the island the majority of her youth, she moved to Europe with her mother on April 9, 1836. It was at this time when she wrote her famous poem "Al partir," and where, after three months, she settled in Spain, a place where her writings began to flourish with more intensity (14). As if she had not experienced enough ups and downs throughout her life, she was widowed twice and gave birth to a sick girl who died after only a couple of months (Marangon 129). Due to the events that occurred throughout the years, "la Avellaneda," as she was popularly known, decided to devote herself to literature. The tragedies that she experienced throughout her life along with her markedly temperamental nature, permeated her works with drama, so symbolic of Romanticism.

Let us return now to Juan Francisco Manzano and begin with the analysis of his autobiography, which was written in 1835 and published for the first time in English, in Europe in 1840, and not to be published in Spanish until almost a century later in Cuba in 1937² (Luis, *Literary Bondage* 1). No one can tell us about his life better than the slave himself. In his autobiography, Manzano relates the cruelties to which he was subjected throughout his life by different masters. As he put it:

Por la más leve maldad propia de
muchacho me encerraban por más de
veinte y cuatro horas en una carbonera.
Era yo en extremo miedo y me
gustaba comer; mi cárcel como

² Domingo del Monte asked the slave to write his autobiography and be part of his literary circle. Manzano's autobiography was translated into the English language by Richard Madden and published in England. (Luis "How to Read *Sab*", 182)

puede verse todavía, era tan oscura que en el más claro del medio-día se necesitaba vela para distinguir en ella los objetos; aquí después de llevar recios azotes me ponían con orden y pena de gran castigo al que me diese una gota de agua; lo que sufría aquejado del hambre y de la sed, atormentado del miedo, en un lugar tan soturno como apartado de la casa, en el traspatio junto a la caballeriza, a un apestoso y evaporante basurero, y a un lugar común-infecto, húmedo y siempre pestífero, que sólo estaba separado por unas paredes todas agujereadas, guardias de disformes ratas, que sin cesar me pasaban por encima: lo que sufría con todo esto, bien puede imaginarse. (Manzano 87)

This type of suffering did not come alone. There were also physical beatings daily causing, among other injuries, a broken nose, leaving Manzano with a face covered in blood. It is not surprising that at the young age of twelve or thirteen years Manzano lived with the constant fear of being abused, given that the simple act of hearing his name being called by his owner would cause his entire body to shake to the point of barely being able to stand up. It is worthy to note the psychological disturbances that Manzano experienced after living through these experiences:

desde la edad de trece a catorce años, la alegría y viveza de mi genio, y lo paralelo de mis labios, llamados *pico de oro*, se trocó todo en cierta melancolía que se me hizo característica con el tiempo. La música me embelesaba, pero sin saber por qué lloraba, y gustaba de tal consuelo, que cuando hallaba ocasión buscaba la soledad para dar larga rienda a mis pesares. Lloraba, pero no gemía, ni se me añadaba el corazón sino en cierto estado

de abatimiento, incurable hasta el día. (Manzano 88)

The effect that this has on the reader is that of a character who is insulted and humiliated, which contrasts to the almost noble condition of Sab, as we show later in the discussion³. But just as in *Sab*, Manzano recalls moments of his life in which he was found in favorable and privileged situations, such as having the opportunity to attend school at only six years of age thanks to the kindness of Marquesa Jústiz (Manzano 84), and being returned to his family in Matanzas after being subjected to inhumane abuse under the custody of Marquesa de Prado Ameno.

As Luis suggests, this shows that Manzano is a reliable source on slavery in Cuba, given that he shows both sides of masters' treatments of their slaves. As Luis states, having lived the different aspects of slavery also creates in the author a psychological trauma that is difficult to overcome which, it is worth noting, mirrors the moral suffering experienced by the fictitious character Sab. It is because of this that Manzano never quite grasps what it means to be a slave, given that he has belonged to nice as well as mean masters, and has lived through all the circumstances possible.

Another important issue to note here is the change in status that Manzano underwent. After being convinced by Del Monte to write his autobiography, Manzano went from being a slave to interacting with the white elite of Cuban scholars. Although he had been used and mistreated by the white people, upon deciding to write his autobiography, Manzano ends up identifying himself with the progressive bourgeoisie, and accepting its values. Unlike Manzano, Sab declined his freedom multiple times given that accepting it would separate him from Carlota, causing in him even more pain. This is another huge difference between Sab and

³Despite this fact, Gómez de Avellaneda does not hide the mistreatment that the slaves received from their masters, and contrasts the benevolence of those like Don Carlos with the rude attitude and disdain towards the slaves – including Sab – of Jorge Otway which causes even his son Enrique to be ashamed.

Manzano: Gómez de Avellaneda's character was a slave for the same family since the day he was born, while Manzano was transferred between different homes experiencing other facets of slavery depending on the varying condition and disposition of his masters. The instability and uncertainty of Manzano contribute to the scorn that he suffered throughout his life, and in this manner he was constantly reminded of his status as a slave and social marginalization from the white elite. But as Luis states, in the process of writing about his life, Manzano shows acceptance and union between Western culture and his own story, which surely confused Manzano even more about his social status. It is also important to note that both characters achieved their freedom, and that both had the privilege of learning how to read and write (Luis, *How to Read Sab* 182). Sab confesses: "Con ella [Carlota] aprendí a leer y a escribir, porque nunca quiso recibir lección alguna sin que estuviere a su lado su pobre mulato Sab" (Gómez de Avellaneda 110). Manzano was similarly lucky, being able to attend school at the early age (and privileged for his slave status) of six years (Manzano 84).

Unlike the memories of the slave, whose purpose was clearly propagandistic, the melodramatic nature of the novel by Gómez de Avellaneda decreases, in some way, her abolitionist purposes and her social justice program not only with respect to race, but also to that of women. Nonetheless, looking more closely at the text, one can notice major criticisms of the colonial system, although there are other concerns regarding the position of women in society which the author addresses in her novel, vindicating both positions, that of women and that of the slave, in a parallel manner.

The main character of her story is the young Sab, slave of the Bellavista mill, whose owner, Don Carlos de B..., is the father of the beautiful Carlota for whom the mulatto feels a deep affection. Although Carlota cares greatly about Sab and had, since they were children,

she is about to marry Enrique Otway, son of an English merchant who aspires to honor his lineage by marrying his son with the eldest daughter of the old Cuban aristocracy. The circumstances of this marriage, unwanted by Don Carlos' family members, and other inheritance problems lead Carlota to lose her dowry, which is the reason why Enrique wants to break his commitment. The slave, who knows of the selfish intentions of his beloved's fiancé, decides to give Carlota his winning lottery ticket with Teresa, Carlota's cousin, as his accomplice, who feels a sincere love for Sab. The lottery prize aids in changing Enrique's mind about the wedding, and he agrees to marry Carlota, satisfying his and his father's materialistic ambitions. The ending of the novel could not have been more melodramatic. Sab dies while his beloved gets married to Enrique, but not before giving Teresa a letter in which he confesses his love for his owner, who only India Martina, a friend of the slave, could discover before his death. Teresa, disillusioned with life, decides to join a convent for the rest of her life, and in one of her visits, Carlota discovers the secret that her favorite slave had kept hidden for so long.

Although the way in which the author shows her position with regard to slavery to the reader is not as evident as it is in other antislavery novels of the círculo delmontino, such as *Francisco* by Anselmo Suárez y Romero or the very *Autobiography* of Manzano, the antislavery discourse in *Sab* is manifested through the moral suffering that the slave experiences, more than it is through the physical beatings. Instead of emphasizing the arduous labor, abuse, and cruelty of the masters towards their slaves, the author focuses on the emotional feelings of suffering that the slave undergoes.

One of the moments in which the author shows the psychological pain of the slave (in this case linked to the sacrifice and tiredness caused by field work) is found a few pages into the novel, when she describes in great detail the typical day of the slaves working the fields

from dawn to dusk:

[...] bajo este cielo de fuego el esclavo casi desnudo trabaja toda la mañana sin descanso, y a la hora terrible del mediodía, jadeando, abrumado bajo el peso de la leña y de la caña que conduce sobre sus espaldas, es abrasado por los rayos del sol que tuesta su cutis, llega el infeliz a gozar todos los placeres que tiene para él la vida: dos horas de sueño y una escasa ración, cuando la noche viene con sus brisas y sus sombras a consolar a la tierra abrasada, y toda la naturaleza descansa, el esclavo va a regar con su sudor y lágrimas el recinto donde la noche no tiene sombras, ni la brisa fresca, porque allí el fuego de la leña ha sustituido al fuego del sol, y el infeliz negro, girando sin cesar en torno de la máquina que arranca a la caña de su dulce jugo, y de las calderas de metal en las que este jugo se convierte en miel a la acción del fuego, ve pasar horas tras horas, y el sol que torna le encuentra todavía allí. (Gómez de Avellaneda 106)

After reading this description, the reader is left with the image of the poor fellow, for whom the pleasures of life have been reduced to resting for a few minutes in the sun. Although this description seems to only provide us with the physical aspects of the suffering that the slaves undergo, it is this suffering that creates a feeling of powerlessness and hence the moral suffering that was mentioned earlier. These human beings no longer react to the situation in which they live, they simply give up and abide by what they are told, without questioning, acting without thinking, under the system that oppresses them. They have neither aspirations nor goals, they simply survive. And it is this suffering, that

of knowing that there are no possibilities for a better future, that leads them to live under these circumstances without questioning, not even for a second, if they would be capable of achieving their freedom. This resignation from the slaves that Gómez de Avellaneda provides for us is one that the reader cannot help but keep in mind throughout the novel. This same surrender again manifested later on in the story when Sab has to give up his love for Carlota due to the social prejudices that are part of the slave society.

Nonetheless, despite the disadvantaged situation of the main character Sab, his case is somewhat different from that of the other slaves. Sab was raised alongside Carlota as if he were her brother, and received an exceptional education for someone in his condition. Sab sometimes shows a certain optimism that is not very common among others of his race even believing at times that he can have a happy future with his precious Carlota. An example of this can be found when the slave shares his feelings for Carlota with Teresa. What this also shows, unlike the other slaves, is the pride that Sab feels which is manifested through his love for his master. The mulatto does not let the color of his skin nor his slave status get in the way of the future that he so much desires. This is why the reader is surprised when, after Sab is granted his freedom, he decides to continue working for Don Carlos de B... and his beloved Carlota, remaining loyal to them. Nonetheless, one can deduce that the reason why Sab decides to continue working for the family is because, although he was granted freedom, he continues to be a slave of his own life and would not know what to do if he were to be completely free, given that he is familiar with his life is serving the family.

This dramatic feel is found toward the end of the novel, when the slave dies. The pathos embodied in the dying process is also seen in the previous scene, when the slave is discovered by a fisherman who passes by: Sab lies on the ground covered in blood, his horse, next to him. Although Sab is very weak here,

he insists on continuing his way. After being brought into the house of an uncle of the fisherman who found him, Sab realizes that in the house next door lives *Índia Martina*, whom he loved as a mother. Upon entering, Sab finds Luisito lying on his bed, and it is here where the following scene takes place:

[...] violentas convulsiones le asaltaron en el momento. Hubo entonces un instante en que el exceso de sus dolores le comunicó un vigor pasajero y probó ponerse en pie por medio de un largo y penoso esfuerzo, pero volvió a caer como herido de una parálisis, y sus dientes rechinaron unos contra otros al apretarse convulsivamente... Sab quiso dirigirle un último adiós [a Luis], pero se detuvo espantado por el sonido de su propia voz, que le pareció un eco del sepulcro... Luego ya no pensó nada: confundieron sus ideas, entorpecióse su imaginación, turbóse su memoria; quebrantóse su cuerpo y cayó sobre la cama de Luis, bañándola con espesos borbontones de sangre que salían de su boca. (Gómez de Avellaneda 245)

We see embodied the physical as well as the psychological pain suffered by the protagonist. One could also say that these two types of suffering potentiate each other, given that the physical pain adds to the psychological pain. Before this scene takes place, in a conversation that Sab has with Teresa, the author leads the reader to believe that Sab would rather die than continue living being a slave of a dream that he will never be able to complete: “[...] No hay en la tierra mayor infeliz que yo, Teresa, no puedo compadecer sino a mí mismo... Sí, yo me compadezco, porque lo conozco, no hay ya en mi corazón sino un solo deseo, una sola esperanza... ¡la muerte!” (Gómez de Avellaneda 225).

It is necessary to go back to the beginning of the story to see the heroic features of this

unconventional slave. The self-confidence that he instills in others is caused by the innate features of his personality; this is something that even Enrique can appreciate: “No tiene nada de la abyección y grosería que es común en gentes de su especie; por el contrario, tiene aire y modales muy finos y aun me atrevería a decir nobles” (Gómez de Avellaneda 128). We cannot forget about the time when Sab and Enrique first meet, when the slave lets us know that his mother had been a princess in Congo before she was sold as a slave. His father, although we do not know for sure, may have been his mother’s master, Don Luis de B..., brother of Don Carlos de B..., Sab’s current master. What this also allows us to see is the idealization of the slave by the narrating voice. Throughout the novel, we can find different times during which Sab is presented with opportunities to show us his heroic nature. He has saved the lives of at least two people, including that of Enrique Otway, Carlota’s love and antihero of the novel, when Sab goes running after him during a terrible storm, risking his own life. We also know of his heroic acts with Luisito, whom he loved as a little brother. Naturally, in the literature of the time, this was not a role that was usually given to a slave; but such features put this character in a central position in the novel and contribute to subverting the stereotypical image of the black as a character who is weak, passive, and who depends on the white man. Furthermore, these heroic acts intensify when they are required by Carlota, and the intensity with which the slave loves the woman is a noble and even desirable behavior when compared to the mean and selfish nature of his rival, Enrique. In granting these attributes to Sab, the author seeks to make a black character more attractive, bringing her novel closer to the bourgeois reader—especially to the women of wealthy families like Gómez de Avellaneda herself—so used to this type of love triangle. But in this case, the author dares to choose a mulatto slave as the protagonist of these unrequited love stories, instead of a rich, white, landowner.

On the other hand, the noble characteristics given to Sab cause a double impact on the reader. Although the heroism and leadership that we find in the slave make the everyday lives of the other slaves seem more improbable, they also help to feed the hope of a possible union between the slave and one of his owners, either Carlota or Teresa herself. Additionally, the physical attractiveness and distinctive personality of Sab make Teresa's interest in him easier to understand, despite the fact that her passionate impulses would have been extremely shocking for the time. Since Sab is the only novel of this literary period that links the problems found in slavery with the servile condition of the nineteenth century woman, I will analyze this related aspect of the author by focusing on the character Teresa (Faedo 112).

The way in which Gómez de Avellaneda describes Teresa is antagonistic to Carlota. We perceive Teresa as isolated and lonely, covered behind a mask of indifference and apathy. This does not mean, however, that she is a soul incapable of passion, given that later on in the novel the author reveals the secret that Teresa keeps from the beginning: the profound and sincere love that she feels for Sab. In the words of the author herself, "Teresa había alcanzado aquella felicidad tranquila y solemne que da la virtud. Su alma altiva y fuerte había dominado su destino y sus pasiones, y su elevado carácter, firme y decidido, le había permitido alcanzar esta alta resignación que es tan difícil a las almas apasionadas como a los caracteres débiles" (Gómez de Avellaneda 258). Almost at the beginning of the novel, Teresa is presented to the reader as someone who is incapable of inspiring love or hate, with inexpressive eyes that do not reflect the emotions of the character. But it is this cold aspect of her personality that allows Teresa to remain calm when everything begins to crumble. It is Teresa who "conservaba su presencia de espíritu, y al mismo tiempo que daba órdenes a las esclavas restableciendo en la casa la tranquilidad, momentáneamente alterada, cuidaba de las niñas

y aun de la misma Carlota" (247-48).

But despite all of these characteristics, we can see the way in which Teresa acts, not worried about social norms. Although she was raised along with Carlota and had all the privileges of any wealthy family after being adopted by Don Carlos de B..., Teresa never cared about the social status of her slave for whom she hid a great love. It may be difficult to see the reason why Teresa feels this way toward Sab, but she herself tries to explain it: "[...] yo soy esa mujer que me confío a ti [Sab]: ambos somos huérfanos y desgraciados... aislados estamos los dos sobre la tierra y necesitamos igualmente compasión, amor y felicidad. Déjame, pues, seguirte a remotos climas al seno de los desiertos... ¡Yo seré tu amiga, tu compañera, tu Hermana!" (Gómez de Avellaneda 220). It is interesting to point out the exact moment when Teresa begins to feel this way about Sab, since it happens right when the slave tells her about his feelings for Carlota and about the slavery that stands between them, wishing to "arrojar en medio de ellos [sus opresores] el terrible grito de libertad y venganza [y] bañarme en sangre de blancos" (209). It is precisely here where the antislavery discourse and the feminist discourse cross paths and become one: Sab's wishes, which one could interpret as the wishes of the author herself, unite with Teresa's bravery and independence. We also notice a type of "rebelliousness" in Teresa, when she acts with autonomy and decides to leave the house and become a nun, joining the convent of the Ursulinas. It is also worthy to note that, although Teresa grew up along with Carlota, she did not have the same privileges as did the biological Daughter of Don Carlos. It was very common for Cuban women in the first half of the nineteenth century to grow up with a slave by their side (Romeu 65), as is the case with Carlota. However, Teresa did not have that same luck despite "sharing" Sab with her cousin. Although as a male, Sab maintains a masculine identity, as a slave he identifies with the social condition of women, grieving about the same social discrimination as this

group (Pastor 93). This marginalization is manifested in a passive manner, given that the slaves and women of the time were used to seeing males for whom money and ambitions opened new roads to power (95-6). As Pastor reveals, it is also worth mentioning that Sab only expresses his feelings and his true identity when he is communicating with a female (either Teresa or Índia Martina) using either dialog or writing as his means of expression (96). The moment when Sab shares with Enrique the facts regarding the origin of his mother (a princess and victim of the slavery business) allows the slave to put himself at the same level of authority over his rival and, as Pastor indicates, symbolizes his loss of liberty in a female context (101). As noted above, Teresa shares more similarities with Sab than she does with her cousin Carlota. Sab and Teresa are joined by the suffering, by a love that cannot be, by “un deseo que excede sus posibilidades reales, ambos, además, son hijos ilegítimos, pobres y protegidos por gente de dinero; ella: fea, él; mulato esclavo” (Faedo 125).

Comparing these two perspectives about slavery in Cuba, we not only see the different types of suffering that took place during this time period, but also the differences and similarities between two of the most important characters in Cuban antislavery literature. In the case of the novel by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, we see that the slaves whom she describes to us suffer their situations from a moral view point more than a physical one. Although the psychological aspect is the one that stands out the most, it is worth noting that the physical suffering and fatigue add to the moral humiliation and vice versa, as seen when Sab describes the feelings of the slaves after working the fields all day, and when Manzano relates in detail the conditions of the little room that he would sometimes be locked in without food, highlighting his subhuman condition. In Manzano's autobiography, we can see two types of suffering, given that he has been subject to different levels of torture

(beatings, purposeful starvation, humiliation), both moral and physical trauma. On the other hand, Manzano was also “lucky” to have lived on the positive side of slavery as well, which occurs when an owner takes care of his slave as if the slave was part of the family. Finally, we hope the reader notes, through this analysis, the different ways of representing slavery using literature as a means of expression, as well as the merging of the antislavery discourse with the feminist discourses in *Sab*, which is not present in other antislavery works of the time. What we learn from these two texts is that the antislavery manifestation can be symbolized through an autobiography as well as through fiction, and that it can hide between its lines an added argument, as is the case of the feminist position that we discovered in the novel by Gómez de Avellaneda.

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