

# UCLA

## Mester

### Title

Colonial Others as Cuba's Protonational Subjects: The Privileged Space of Women, Slaves and Natives in Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0w76w0rx>

### Journal

Mester, 32(1)

### Author

Comfort, Kelly

### Publication Date

2003

### DOI

10.5070/M3321014594

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2003 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

# Colonial Others as Cuba's Protonational Subjects: The Privileged Space of Women, Slaves and Natives in Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*<sup>1</sup>

Kelly Comfort  
University of California, Davis

Throughout Cuban literary history, authors and critics have celebrated racial admixture as representative of the island's unique national character. Beginning most notably with José Martí's "Nuestra América" in 1891, one encounters frequent praise of *mestizaje* and a manifest desire to unite the natives, the newly freed slaves, and the "campesinos" or country folk against the foreign element that continued to relegate Cuba to colonial status. More than half a century later, Alejo Carpentier, in his famous 1949 preface to *El reino de este mundo*, addresses the presence of the "marvelous real" in America and offers further celebration of the Caribbean region as a place that, "[b]ecause of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by the recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [*mestizaje*], . . . is far from using up its wealth of mythologies" (88). Roberto Fernández Retamar, a contemporary Cuban critic, echoes the sentiments of his precursors when he insists that "within the colonial world there exists a case unique to *the entire planet*: a vast zone for which *mestizaje* is not an accident but rather an essence, the central line: ourselves, 'our mestizo America'" (4). Owing to these and many other examples, it has become a commonplace in literary and historical studies to discuss *mestizaje* as a defining characteristic of Cuban national identity.

This study examines a literary work written more than four decades before the abolition of slavery (1886) and over half a century before the achievement of Cuban independence from Spain (1898). Despite its early

publication date in 1841, however, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga's *Sab* serves as an important precursor to later celebrations of Cuba's amalgamated racial heritage. The white Creole author prophetically envisions the intersection of abolitionist discourse and the call for a multiracial nation in her construction of a conglomerated protonational subject which, symbolizing a palimpsest of oppressed "Others," is destined to lead her native and colonial Cuba toward independence and nationhood. The novel aims to eliminate from the island both "the dealers in human flesh" and the unscrupulous foreign merchants, while incorporating into the newly imagined space those "unhappy race[s] deprived of human rights": "races" which — in the novel's expansive definition — include slaves, natives, and women (30–31). The nation Gómez de Avellaneda imagines shall not be drafted upon racial, gender, or ethnic lines; rather, her native island is to become an independent nation in which the commodities to be exchanged do not include slaves or women and the national subjects are no longer the objects of patriarchal, commercial, or foreign control.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas critics have consistently commented on Gómez de Avellaneda's antislavery or abolitionist intent in writing *Sab*, more recent scholarship has reoriented the attention onto the ways in which this critique of slavery is coupled with an even more intense condemnation of female bondage.<sup>3</sup> The recent trend has thus been to explain *Sab*'s multi-faceted attack on: "slavery and racism along with marriage and the subjection of women" (Kirkpatrick 151); "la injusticia de toda servidumbre" (Barreda Tomás 619); "race and sex privilege" (Schlau 495); "a general system of unequal, binary, aesthetic, and social relationships between light and dark, men and women, masters and servants" (Sommer 119). The crucial difference between the present study and previous criticism lies in my emphasis on the importance of the anticolonial and protonational arguments made in the narrative. I will examine how the colonial situation of Gómez de Avellaneda's native island informed her treatment of the exploited characters and prompted her utopic vision of Cuba as an independent nation. In an attempt to ascertain why this author posed the views she did when, where, and in the form she did, my analysis of *Sab* will discuss how the ideas purported in the novel intersect with and transform the broader debates on the political economy of slavery and colonialism held by Gómez de Avellaneda's contemporaries with respect to such topics as the fate of the institution of slavery on the

island, Cuba's relationship with the metropolis and the international market, as well as its growing heterogeneous society.

In her effort to envision an amalgamated protonational subject who would occupy the imagined Cuban nation, Gómez de Avellaneda begins by undoing, from the very outset of the novel, the dichotomies by which white men assert themselves as *subjects* who use, sell, and control slaves as *objects*. Taking the titular character and chief protagonist as our first example, we see that Sab's "blackness," the visual marker of a slave's otherness, is not overtly apparent as demonstrated in the opening scene wherein he successfully passes as a free landowner. The narrator describes his appearance in a confused manner: "He did not appear to be a white *criollo*; neither was he black nor could one take him for a descendant of the indigenous inhabitants of the Antilles. His face was a singular composite which revealed the mingling of two distinct races, an amalgam, it could be said, of the features of the African and the European yet without being a perfect mulatto" (28). Sab's racial indefiniteness is the first step in Gómez de Avellaneda's attempt to uproot the untenable underpinnings of the evil institution. I agree with Doris Sommer's assertion that Sab functions as "a new incarnation of an extinct aboriginal 'Cuban,' one who exceeds or violates the strict racial categories that have made slavery work" (113). His hybridization disrupts the binary opposition needed by the patriarchal, slave-owning colonizers to justify and perpetuate their power. In the colonial setting of Cuba, where "the division between white and nonwhite was . . . jealously guarded by the colonial state and the white elite" (Schmidt-Nowara 8), Gómez de Avellaneda's decision to create visual confusion with regard to Sab's skin color is indeed significant. She further underscores Sab's unique and elevated social status by juxtaposing his eloquent language (30), aristocratic manners (44), "noble sentiments" (106), "man's heart" (96), and free and noble soul (30) with his "enslaved and base" body (30). Sab's "internal whiteness" and mere vestigial "black" appearance serve to question and undermine the authority by which white men elevate themselves over black slaves.<sup>4</sup> As Sommer astutely observes, "Sab's racial and historical character is already so intimate an amalgamation of terms that it has produced a unique, 'autochthonous' type" (122), a type that will eventually come to serve as the visual and ideological symbol of *cubanidad*.

Not only does Gómez de Avellaneda attempt to destroy the categories of master and slave, white subject and black object, but she also destabilizes the power of men (with Sab being the obvious exception here) by esteeming the virtues and values of women. To underscore her negative opinion of the patriarchal, colonial, slave society, Gómez de Avellaneda establishes an almost complete lack of maternal figures, a factor that contributes, at least in part, to the tragic fates of her protagonists. Carlota has for four years been without “the tenderest of mothers” (34); Teresa “lost her mother at birth” (36); and Sab’s “unfortunate mother” died in his arms (81). This motherlessness is portrayed as the negative consequence of male domination, a reality underscored by depictions of Cuba’s threatened and exploited “virgin” soil. Ultimately, Gómez de Avellaneda suggests the possibility for improvement and independence via a return to virgin soil, to the common mother, to native Cuba, and thereby genders her imagined nation. Thus, despite the majority of her characters’ unhappy fates, the Cuban author *does* create the possibility for hope, for a future. The future she envisions, in part a return to the past, begins the moment Sab says to Martina, “be my mother, take me for your son.” (81). Sab’s choice of Martina is significant insofar as he replaces his own late African mother, a princess from the Congo, with the vestiges of an original, precolonial Cuban mother. When Martina, having lost all of her own supposedly “native” children and left only one grandchild, agrees to adopt Sab as her son, Gómez de Avellaneda continues her sketch of an independent and protonational Cuba, one whose feminization or depatriarchalization is also significant. Sommer supports this interpretation, claiming that Martina, “the mistress of Cubitas, is an inspiration for wresting a kind of independence from bondage” (115). More importantly, this merger of the “native” mother with the hybrid son introduces the possibility for a new Cuban protonational subject; through this familial bond, Sab indeed becomes “as legitimate and autochthonous in this New World as were the indigenous . . . masters of the island” (Sommer 114). Martina provides Sab with a metaphorical “rebirth” that allows him to replace what he has lost, namely a country to call his own. Thus, in spite of Sab’s earlier claim: “I have neither father nor mother . . . I am alone in the world; no one will weep at my death. I have no homeland to defend, because slaves have no country” (107), his choice of Martina as adoptive mother

provides him with a new place of birth in Cuba. It is through this mother/son union (which, as I shall address shortly, originates in the symbolic setting of Cubitas) that Gómez de Avellaneda joins the causes of the slave and the native as they unite against their common enemy: the Spanish colonizers.

Indeed, the Spanish colonizers were responsible for both the extermination of the indigenous population and the importation of slaves to the island. In *Cuba: From Conquistador to Castro*, Geoff Simons explains how the former event led directly to the latter: “[t]he Spanish onslaught on the Indian communities of the Caribbean continued for some decades [1530–1560] — until the extermination of virtually the entire Indian population of the islands stimulated the Spanish Christians to import slaves from Africa. The multifaceted European onslaught on the indigenous peoples had wrought nothing less than genocide” (94–95). Recognizing this severe decrease in the island’s native population, Gómez de Avellaneda establishes as ambiguous Martina’s claim to “indigenous” origin. “Doesn’t she [Martina] claim to be a descendent of the Indian race and put on ridiculously majestic airs?” (72), asks Don Carlos. Sab responds by stating that the farmers of Cubitas “really believe her to be a descendant of that unfortunate race, now almost extinct on this island” (72). Although the novel never reveals whether or not Martina’s claim to nativeness is legitimate, the mere suggestion of such a fact proves to be a crucial step in Gómez de Avellaneda’s redefinition of what constitutes a “native” Cuban. I would suggest that the novel comes to define as “natives” those born on Cuban soil, and wishes to “other” or exclude all European outsiders. This promotion of Creole nationalism is an important move in imagining Cuba as independent insofar as the place of enunciation is no longer Spain, but the island of Cuba, and it is the “native” Cuban who acts as the “self” who defines Spain, or simply Europe, as “other.”<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the “native” Cuban subjects serve to symbolize a level of equality not found under the present colonial system, and hence never realized within the novel. This is best exemplified when Sab narrates Martina’s hopes that “[t]he earth which once was drenched in blood will be so again: the descendants of the oppressors will be themselves oppressed, and black men will be the terrible avengers of those of copper color” (73), and then explains that contrary to such hopes for an active and slave-led revenge, it will not be he who leads



a rebellion. "Calm yourself," Sab tells Teresa, "you are not threatened by any danger. The slaves patiently drag their chains: in order to break them they might only need to hear one voice which cries out to them 'You are men!,' but I assure you that voice will not be mine" (97).<sup>6</sup> Even though Sab does come to the natives' aid many times, e.g., soliciting money from Don Carlos to help Martina, saving both Luis and Leal from the fire, and building and furnishing a new hut for Martina, he actively refuses to promote change through a rebellion. Instead, Gómez de Avellaneda attempts to bring about change by what Sommer refers to as "a marriage of signs" (123). Rather than avenge himself with respect to the white slave owners, Sab wishes to marry Carlota, his former owner's daughter. Knowing, however, that such love is in vain, Sab tells Teresa:

Then I remembered that I was the offspring of a defiled race, then I remembered too that I was a mulatto and a slave . . . then my heart, seared by love and jealousy, first began to throb with indignation, and I cursed nature which condemned me to worthlessness and shame. But I was unjust, Teresa, *for nature had not been any less our mother than yours. . . . But human society has not imitated the equality of our common mother who has told us in vain: 'You are brothers.' Idiotic society, which has reduced us to the necessity of hating it and of founding our happiness on its total destruction!* (97, my emphasis)

The reference to the "common mother" takes the already complex familial metaphor a step further. Not only are Sab and Martina joined in a mother/son relation, but the familial bond is strengthened by their attachment to the "common mother" who ensures that each member of this pseudofamily is the equal of the others. Consequently, despite the frustrated merger of Sab and Carlota in the romantic sense, they are joined nonetheless in a familial bond — metaphorically as "brothers" and literally as cousins, although Sab, unaware of his father's identity, does not share the reader's knowledge and Carlota's suspicion of this latter relationship.

Carlota thus becomes the final member needed to complete the model of national consolidation and the redefinition of the "native" that this novel envisions. Being a woman, Carlota is exploited by, and

powerless within, that “mercantile and profit-oriented atmosphere” of white men (135). Thus, whereas Martina’s enemy would be the colonizers and Sab’s the slave owners, Carlota is subjugated and enslaved by capitalistic foreign merchants, most notably by her husband and father-in-law. In fact, Enrique, “surrounded since infancy by an atmosphere of commerce” (47), and his father George, both “so earthbound and sustained by material gain” (137), represent the negative forces that rob Carlota’s sisters of their inheritance and make women poor, blind victims, like slaves (144). Sab rightly asserts that Enrique will take Carlota “to wife like a piece of merchandise, calculatingly, for profit, transforming into shameful speculation the most holy bond, the most solemn pledge!” (109). *Sab* thus launches a staunch criticism of the patriarchal and capitalistic world that determines the tragic fates of our exploited female characters.

Interestingly enough, the very subjects who dominate and benefit from the novel’s colonial setting — most obviously the foreign capitalists but so too the Spanish colonizers — are also those who would warrant exile if Cuba gained the desired or imagined independence. At the exact historical moment in which Cuba’s economy slowly begins its transition from slave labor to capitalism, it seems that Gómez de Avellaneda attacks both systems on similar grounds: the exploitation of slaves in the former instance and of women in the latter case. The novel’s dual attack on the foreign capitalists and the promoters and supporters of slavery corresponds to the intersection of race, economy, and colonial/national status during the first half of the nineteenth century in Cuban and Spanish discourse. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara points out, in *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1974*, the interrelatedness of these factors when he speaks of the efforts of the Spanish Abolitionist Society to end Cuban and Puerto Rican slavery, claiming that their aim “met with massive resistance, both in the colonies and in Spain, as it threatened the very basis of economic and political hegemony within the imperial system” (1). This assertion rightly suggests that slavery was simultaneously caught up in a complex web of concerns with respect to both capitalist development and the nature of the colonial government. On the one hand, many saw slavery as essential to the prosperity of Cuba’s sugar oligarchy. Consequently, despite the belief that slavery was incompatible with the cause of national independence, economic considerations



superseded moral and protonational concerns, causing many to defend slavery on economic grounds. On the other hand, some Spanish and Cuban abolitionists, staunch defenders of the market economy, “criticized the dominant strategies of capital accumulation in Spain and the Antilles and sought to transform them by abolishing slavery and opening free markets” (Schmidt-Nowara 12). It is essential to realize that the novel’s protonational thrust involves an attack on the British capitalists in particular. It is as if Gómez de Avellaneda recognized the fact that “[s]i España era la metrópoli política, Inglaterra fue la metrópoli económica, y no sólo comercial, racionalizando y jerarquizando el entramado de la economía exterior de la isla de Cuba en Europa” (Bahamonde and Cayuela 66). By mid-century, “[c]apitalismo y esclavitud resultaban incompatibles” (Rivas Muñoz 4); “[e]l éxito del comerciante sería el contrapeso del fracaso del viejo hacendado” insofar as the coastal traders and merchants “alcanzó un poder económico indiscutido y francamente hegemónico, muy por encima de la vieja oligarquía azucarera” (Bahamonde and Cayuela 27, 30).

Gómez de Avellaneda rejects the island’s dependency on slave labor, yet she also critiques the Otways’s capitalistic and neocolonial streak in particular and the beginnings of Cuba’s transition to a market economy in general. In order to understand her unique position, it is helpful to note that whereas a contemporary school of antislavery — the Del Monte Group — did exist in Cuba before the publication of *Sab* in 1841, Gómez de Avellaneda was not part of this group for a variety of reasons, namely “her youth, her gender, and the fact that she came from central Cuba, which was a fair distance from Havana and whose principal industry was cattle, not sugar” (Scott xx). Geography undoubtedly played an influential role in shaping our author’s views towards slavery and Spanish rule.<sup>7</sup> To a large extent her stance echoes that of many eastern Cubans who, as Louis A. Pérez Jr. explains, “[w]ith proportionately fewer slaves, and large numbers of free people of color, . . . [were] generally less sympathetic to slavery, less tied to sugar production, and less committed to the colonial structures upon which slavery and sugar production depended” (91). Hence, Gómez de Avellaneda can urge abolition and independence, even if she simultaneously laments the increasingly capitalistic character of her native land. Whereas historically the call for abolition was fueled by economic concerns

and the realization that Cuba had to become more industrialized if it were to remain prosperous, here Gómez de Avellaneda reveals only moral reasons in her praise of Sab. In contrast to Raúl Cepero Bonilla's assertion, in *Azúcar y abolición*, that the causes of the gradual call for abolitionism among the plantation owners can be found "en la economía de la sociedad cubana y no en los sentimientos de su heterogénea población," our author critiques these new economic motivations and does in fact consider the various needs of Cuba's heterogeneous population with respect to both race and sex (26).

The novel's various critiques come together through the character of Carlota, whose many visions of freedom and equality are, if not aimed initially toward women, directed at her oppressed counterparts: the slaves and the natives. Carlota contests, "[w]hen I am Enrique's wife . . . no unhappy soul around me will breathe the poisonous air of slavery. We will give all our blacks their freedom. What does it matter to be less wealthy?" (57). Additionally, she admits, "I do cry when I remember an unfortunate people [the natives] who once dwelt on the lands we live on now . . . Here those children of nature lived in happiness and innocence: this virgin soil did not need to be watered with the sweat of slaves to be productive; everywhere it gave shade and fruit, water and flowers, and its entrails had not been rent asunder so that its hidden treasures could be torn out by greedy hands" (74, my emphasis). Employing a language rich in metaphors of violation and rape, Carlota demonstrates her sympathy to the injustices that characterize Sab and Martina's fates. Yet the cruelty Carlota's counterparts have suffered as a result of these "greedy hands" is not so different than her own fate, since, as Kirkpatrick tellingly states, marriage uproots Carlota from the "virginal garden" and replants her in the "world of the marketplace" (149).

It is not, however, until Carlota reads Sab's letter and hears Teresa's final words that she comes fully to grasp the injustices of her own situation. Teresa explains it to her most directly:

May Heaven keep you from one day looking back with sorrow at the country in which you were born, where uprightness is still esteemed, base actions are despised, and where, in obscurity, fundamental virtues still exist. Men are evil, Carlota, but you should not hate them nor become discouraged on your road. It is useful to know

what they are and not to ask more of them than they can give; it is useful to relinquish those dreams that perhaps no longer exist anymore except in the heart of a *daughter of Cuba*. For we have been fortunate, Carlota, to have been born on *virgin soil*, under a magnificent sky, not to have lived in the bosom of a feeble nature but surrounded by all of God's great works. (138, my emphasis)

Following these words and the reading of Sab's letter, Carlota returns to virgin soil, to "Cubitas," in search of Martina. Seeking solace from her marital woes (as indeed the novel's literal "marriage of signs" proves disastrous) and feeling a strong allegiance to the plight of the natives and slaves, Carlota abandons the cold and mercantile world of Enrique Otway and returns to the wild, untamed interior of Cubitas.<sup>8</sup> If we recall Carlota's initial vision of marital bliss which took place on her first trip to Cubitas — "Oh, Enrique! I lament not having been born then when you, an Indian like me, would have built me a palm hut where we would have enjoyed a life of love, innocence, and freedom" (74) — we can better understand the progression she makes from a naïve romantic to a disillusioned realist. Many critics have noted that this passage reflects Carlota's (and by extension Gómez de Avellaneda's) notion of a "pre-European utopia of peace and harmony with nature" (Scott xxi) as well as her desire for "the possibility of existence outside history and society in which community, equality, and happiness are simply the conditions of the natural paradise that she believed Cuba to be before the European invasion" (Kirkpatrick 173). Moreover, Steven Skattebo locates here a "double sense of nostalgia" both for the Cuba the author knew as a child and for an imagined "pre-Conquest paradise" (188–189).

Indeed, Gómez de Avellaneda's call for an independent Cuba has nostalgic undertones insofar as she imagines an autonomous nation resembling the pre-colonial and pre-slavery past of her native island, rather than reflecting the increasingly capitalistic character it was to assume. This is best demonstrated by Carlota's return at the end of the narrative to the symbolic Cubitas, the idealized space of "little Cuba." In the closing scene, "news of a miraculous event began to circulate rapidly" (147). The villagers of Cubitas mistake Carlota for the ghost or spirit of the recently deceased Martina, namely because they find it easier to imagine that Sab's adoptive Indian mother has

risen from her tomb to pay tribute to him, than to fathom that Carlota, a white Creole woman and Sab's former mistress, would have been unable "to forget the slave who rests in a simple grave under that magnificent sky" (147). According to Skattebo's astute analysis, this final scene reflects "more than just mistaken identity on the part of the cubiteros," as it also implies a "symbolic identification" with Carlota replacing Martina and/or the "guaca," a term referring to "a light that appears at night usually associated with indigenous burial sites or buried treasure" (194). Let us remember the story narrated by Sab on the initial trip to Cubitas about the recurring light thought by the villagers to be caused by the soul of the chief Camagüey on its nightly return to the fatal hill from which the ruler had been thrown by the Spanish colonizers (72–73). Now, once again, Gómez de Avellaneda links the magical world of Cubitas with the tale of a miraculous night vision. The story of the flashing light "evolves into various manifestations: Sab replaces Camagüey, the light of the guaca is fused with Martina, then with Carlota. Carlota, as a criolla, takes on the identity that emanates . . . from the land itself, the identity of the indigenous and African elements of Cuba" (Skattebo 195). In this way, Gómez de Avellaneda "creates a symbolic resolution, a spiritual union, a transculturation, a widening of identity" (Skattebo 195). She merges the figure of Carlota with the natives and slaves, thereby designating this daughter of Cuba as the final member of the redefined "native" Cuban subject. Nevertheless, the life world of the novel — the patriarchal slavocracy which dominates colonial Cuba — does not allow for the emergence of this new conglomerated subject. Recognizing this, Gómez de Avellaneda must make her heroes the victims in her novelistic world. She cannot portray the merger of Sab, Martina, and Carlota, except in their symbolic union at the site of Sab and Martina's graves. Their desired world has not yet been attained, but the seeds have indeed been planted in the soil readers will inherit and cultivate.<sup>9</sup>

I find it remarkable that, already in 1841, Gómez de Avellaneda was able to prescribe a future for Cuba that corresponded so closely to the ensuing historical realities. Not only did abolition become a necessary requirement for achieving independence, but so too were protonational sentiments tied to the idea of national consolidation. Yet with respect to repeatedly made contentions that "the discourse of *mestizaje* has had a peculiar currency in Cuba . . . [and] has been

perhaps the principal signifier of Cuba's national cultural identity" (Kutzinsky 5), it is nonetheless critical to understand how the vision of *cubanidad* propounded in *Sab* consists in a version of mestizaje that demands racial, ethnic, and gender equality as well as a common allegiance to the imagined Cuban nation.<sup>10</sup> If we return to one of the initial descriptions of Sab as someone who "did not appear to be a white *criollo*; neither was he black nor could one take him for a descendant of the indigenous inhabitants of the Antilles" (28), we recognize that Gómez de Avellaneda hints from the beginning that she aims to merge the various races and ethnicities found in Cuba. Because he does not fit into any recognizable racial category, Sab synthesizes all three: the white Creole, the black, and the native. According to Gómez de Avellaneda, Sab, his "native mother" Martina, and Carlota, "daughter of the tropics," together would be the Cuban protonational subject *par excellence*. Yet this hybridized new subject cannot be successful within the novel's setting insofar as the triad could not represent the depicted Cuban colony. Instead, they are figures to be incorporated into the future Cuban nation, one whose ideal national subject would be an aggregate of the oppressed members of its present. Thus, by merging notions of autonomy and autochthony, Gómez de Avellaneda creates a powerful counterhegemonic discourse of more than just antislavery and proto-feminism insofar as she also promotes protonationalism.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank Neil Larsen, Ana Peluffo, and Chuck Walker for their thoughtful and helpful suggestions at various stages of this study.

2. *Sab* was originally published in Spain, where Gómez de Avellaneda was living at the time. Consequently, as Nina M. Scott explains, the author "had the advantage of being in Spain and living under the generally liberal government of the Regent, Queen María Cristina; publication of an anti-slavery work was possible in Spain, as opposed to Cuba, where it was not" (xxi). In fact, *Sab* was not published in Cuba until 1914 on the centennial of Gómez de Avellaneda's birth, namely because the Cuban national archives had classified *Sab* as containing "doctrines subversive to the system of slavery and contrary to moral and good habit" (Scott xv).



3. One of the most important studies of gender-criticism is Susan Kirkpatrick's "Feminizing the Romantic Subject in Narrative: Gómez de Avellaneda," in which the author rightly contends that Gómez de Avellaneda has "a doubly marginalized perspective — both as a woman and as a colonial — that gave her a critical consciousness of white, male, metropolitan hegemony" (135), yet nonetheless focuses more on the author's gender than her colonial status when she concludes that the use of Sab and abolitionist arguments function simply as a mask for Gómez de Avellaneda's self-expression and as a vehicle for feminist protest (156–157). Similarly, Lucia Guerra in "Estrategias femeninas en la elaboración del sujeto romántico en la obra de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda" discusses the novel's use of a palimpsest structure in creating the romantic subject, which she astutely considers the merger of Sab, Martina, and Carlota, but then reduces the novel's overall message to the notion that "la esclavitud más intolerable es aquella de la mujer blanca en la sociedad burguesa" (713). Thus, Guerra too argues that the dominant theme is the "enslavement" of women, thereby downplaying the significance of the abolitionist sentiments and ignoring the protonational thrust of the work.

4. One factor that contributes to the elevation of Sab's social status lies in the fact that he is an aristocrat from both of his parents. Thus, from a class perspective he deserves the multiple praise he receives. Consequently, while Gómez de Avellaneda attempts to eliminate a hierarchy based on race, gender, and ethnicity, the hierarchy itself is never questioned.

5. And it is in this sense that Kirkpatrick and Guerra's emphasis on the remarkability of having a *female* romantic subject overlaps with my analysis. Just as they claim that the female "I" occupies a space formerly dominated by male selves, so too does the redefined Cuban subject usurp the narrating voice from the Spanish colonists and the British merchants.

6. There are obvious historical reasons why Gómez de Avellaneda may have been reluctant to portray Sab as the leader of a slave rebellion, namely owing "to the fear of slave insurrections . . . [that] pervaded the first half of the nineteenth century as a result of the successful Haitian Revolution (1791–1803) and to the negrophobic 'Africanization of Cuba' scare brought on by ever-increasing demands for slave labor that accompanied the rapid expansion of Cuba's sugar industry" (Kutzinski 5). The narrator does address the former fear in describing Don Carlos as typical of Cubans who, "always in a state of alarm after the frightful and recent example of a neighboring island, could never hear without fear any words in the mouth of a man of that unfortunate color which made patent the feeling of his



abused rights and the possibility of recapturing them” (73). In response to the latter concern, Jill Ann Netchinsky points out, in “Engendering a Cuban Literature: Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Narrative,” that most wealthy Cubans preferred “to keep the protection of the Spanish armed forces than risk ruin in a possible republic teeming with free blacks” (1).

7. Senator Ruiz Gómez’s 1879 publication, *Diario de Sesiones del Senado* (*Diary of Senate Sessions*), reports that in 1841 there were 418,291 whites, 152,838 free blacks, and 436,495 African slaves in Cuba (Mesa 66–67). Thus, free blacks and slaves comprised more than half of the island’s total population of 1,007,624 in the year in which *Sab* was published. Yet despite the fact that blacks outnumbered whites in Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century (Luis 103), regional differences greatly affected population distribution. According to the 1841 census in Cuba, whites comprised 38.62% of the population in western Cuba, with free blacks making up 10.50% and slaves comprising 50.80% of the region’s inhabitants. Likewise, in eastern Cuba, whites (33.50%) were the minority in comparison to the combined number of free blacks (30.39%) and slaves (36.09%). In central Cuba, however, the white population (58.00%) was considerably larger with respect to the free blacks (16.14%) and slaves (25.64%) (Pérez Murillo 52, 54, 56).

8. Steven Skattebo offers a compelling eco-critical interpretation of the novel. He does an excellent job analyzing the significance of Cubitas, claiming that “what is often exalted in the novel is not the vitality of Cuba in general, but rather a specific space: the rural interior, Cubitas, ‘little Cuba’, the home of small diversified farms and wild, untamed nature” (“Green Romanticism” 191). Moreover, he notes “a progression in the novel, paralleling the path of encroaching Europeanized monoculture, from the coastal areas — point of entry of Europeanization — to the diversified agriculture of Bella Vista, and finally to the untamed wilderness of Cubitas” (191). Given this progression, Carlota’s return to Cubitas, as we shall now see, is extremely significant within the narrative.

9. In her reading of *Sab*, Kirkpatrick argues that “Sab, Teresa, and Carlota form a grouping unified not by rivalry for a love object, as in the conventional triangle, by rather by shared values and a common experience of powerlessness within the social structure” (147). I locate a different trinity in my interpretation of the work, which includes Martina as opposed to Teresa. Thus, whereas Kirkpatrick and I both emphasize the fact that Gómez de Avellaneda creates a triad so as to promote a form of intersubjectivity and a sense of community, she goes on to conclude that Sab, Carlota, and Teresa

“constitute the novel’s subject as a kind of trinity, a fragmented but mysteriously whole entity that at once projects the perception of the Romantic self’s division and promotes the values of intersubjectivity” (147), while I argue that Sab, Carlota, and Martina merge to promote the ideal of equality, liberty, and transculturation needed for the future of Cuban national identity.

10. One important distinction between Vera Kutzinsky’s examination of *mestizaje* and the one we encounter in *Sab* is that the former study considers the repercussions of racial admixture over the body and sexuality of the mulatta, whereas the latter fictional text addresses the figure of the racially mixed male. Investigation into Gómez de Avellaneda’s interesting reversal of perceptions of gender status with regard to the figure of the mulatto/a warrants further study.

### Works Cited

- Bahamonde, Ángel and José Cayuela. *Hacer las Américas: Las elites coloniales españolas en el siglo XIX*. Madrid: Alianza, 1992.
- Barreda Tomás, Pedro. “Abolicionismo y feminismo en La Avellaneda: Lo negro como artificio narrativa en *Sab*.” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*. 342 (1978): 613–626.
- Carpentier, Alejo. “On the Marvelous Real in America.” 1949. Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 89–108.
- Cepero Bonilla, Raúl. *Azúcar y abolición*. Barcelona: Crítica, 1976.
- Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga, Gertrudis. *Sab and Autobiography*. Trans. and Ed. Nina M. Scott. Austin: U Texas P, 1993.
- Guerra, Lucia. “Estrategías femininas en la elaboración del sujeto romántico en la obra de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.” *Revista Iberoamericana*. 51 (1985): 707–722.
- Kirkpatrick, Susan. “Feminizing the Romantic Subject in Narrative: Gómez de Avellaneda.” *Las románticas: Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, 1835–1890*. Berkeley: U California P, 1989.
- Kutzinski, Vera. *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*. Charlottesville: U Virginia P, 1993.
- Luis, William. “La novela antiesclavista: Texto, contexto y escritura.” *Cuadernos Americanos*. 236 (1981): 103–116.

- Mesa, Roberta. *El colonialismo en la crisis del xix español*. Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1990.
- Netchinsky, Jill Ann. "Engendering a Cuban Literature: Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Narrative (Manzano, Suárez y Romero, Gómez de Avellaneda, A. Zambrana)." Diss. Yale University, 1986.
- Pérez, Louis A. Jr. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. New York: Oxford U P, 1988.
- Pérez Murillo, María Dolores. *Aspectos demográficos y sociales en la isla de Cuba en la primera mitad del siglo xix*. Cadiz: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cadiz, 1988.
- Retamar, Roberto Fernández. *Caliban and Other Essays*. Trans. Edward Baker. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1989.
- Rivas Muñoz, Mercedes. *La narrativa antiesclavista cubana (1838-1882)*. Diss. Sevilla U. 1989. *Tesis Doctorales en Microficha*. Sevilla: Editorial de la Universidad de Sevilla, 1989
- Schlau, Stacey. "Stranger in a Strange Land: The Discourse of Alienation in Gómez de Avellaneda's Abolitionist Novel *Sab*." *Hispania: A Journal Devoted to the Teaching of Spanish and Portuguese*. 69.3 (1986): 495-503.
- Schmidt-Nowara, Christopher. *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874*. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 1999.
- Scott, Nina M. Introduction. *Sab and Autobiography*. By Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga. Trans. and Ed. Nina M. Scott. Austin: U Texas P, 1993. xi-xxvii.
- Simons, Geoff. *Cuba: From Conquistador to Castro*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1996.
- Skattebo, Steven. "Green Romanticism: Ecocentric Identity in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*." *Hispanic Journal*. 20.1 (1999): 187-199.
- Sommer, Doris. "Sab C'est Moi." *Genders*. 2 (July 1988): 111-126.