



## Subversion in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*

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The colonial and slave society that was Cuba of the early nineteenth century is the setting for Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's first novel, *Sab*.<sup>1</sup> Published in Madrid in 1841, this novel represents Avellaneda's literary struggle against the injustices of slavery and the oppressive treatment of women within the patriarchal Romantic framework of the early 1800s. Avellaneda's novel draws a parallel between women and slaves: "Como los esclavos, ellas arrastran pacientemente su cadena y bajan la cabeza bajo el yugo de las leyes humanas" (Gómez de Avellaneda 194). Catherine Davies states that *Sab* "is the only feminist-abolitionist novel published by a woman in nineteenth-century Spain or its slaveholding colony Cuba" (1). The fact that *Sab* was banned in Cuba demonstrates not only how problematic this female-authored anti-slavery text was, but also how carefully and compromisingly it had to be constructed.<sup>2</sup> By way of an analysis of the novel's protagonist and three main female characters (Carlota, Teresa, and Martina) and their subversion of traditional, binary representations of race, gender, and class, I examine the underlying tension that exists in the text between subversion and the thwarting of subversion.

Although conceived in Cuba and adapted to a Cuban context, *Sab* incorporates liberal values and Romantic themes and paradigms found in earlier European novels. Critics have noted parallels between *Sab* and the Romantic paradigm of subjectivity that emerged in Spain, as well as influences stemming from the novels and writings of Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Hugo, and Goethe. Davies, who calls *Sab* a "typically Romantic Latin American novel" for its subjectivity, idealization, sensibility, melodrama, and fatalistic determinism, also points out its connection with Spanish Romanticism, the *costumbrista* genre, and the European sentimental novel because of the novel's characterization of its hero, its plot, the description of its setting, and the role of nature and emotion. Similar to another Cuban novel with Romantic elements, Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), *Sab*'s characters represent European, African, indigenous, and mixed racial origins, and their relationships transgress race, class, and gender boundaries. In this way, Avellaneda's novel reflects Doris Sommer's statement that "the Latin American canon of romantic novels seems to wage a consistent struggle against classical habits of oppositional thinking" (122-23).

Set on the idyllic Bellavista sugar plantation near the city of Puerto Príncipe in Camagüey during the early nineteenth century, Avellaneda's novel centers on Sab, a mulatto slave, and his impossible love for Carlota, the *criolla* heiress of the Bellavista fortune.<sup>3</sup> Carlota's love for Enrique Otway, an English merchant whom she eventually marries, complicates the love story. Teresa, Carlota's orphaned cousin who is secretly in love with Enrique, is central to the plot because of her relationship with Sab and Carlota. A close bond exists also between Sab and Martina, an indigenous woman who considers the orphaned Sab her son. The unique qualities of the above-mentioned characters and their relationships with each other threaten the colonial preference for established categories of race, gender, and class. The novel begins with an encounter between colonizer (Otway) and colonized (Sab), yet the physical description of Sab and the development of the plot around an enslaved mulatto's desire for a white woman complicate this dichotomy. I agree with previous studies that read *Sab* as a subversive text. However, my concern is in demonstrating that although Avellaneda's novel criticizes the effects of colonization on Cuban society, its message is limited by the characters' failure to transcend literary and societal norms. These norms prevent *Sab*'s characters from delivering a powerful message against the oppression of marginalized people. Despite their attempts at subversion and their aspirations for a better life, *Sab*'s protagonists are subdued and defeated by the societal limitations and conventions they seek to overcome, as well as by the Romantic roles assigned to them in the text. Likewise, the text's imaginative potential for subverting categories of race, class, and gender and for denouncing the oppression of women and slaves is thwarted by society's expectations for women and an early nineteenth-century novel's compliance with the Romantic artistic conventions of its time. In *Romanticism and Feminism*, Alan Richardson explains the difficulties facing women writers within the predominantly male tradition of Romanticism. Education, publication, and criticism remained under male control. In Richardson's words, "the novelistic conventions and accepted literary language of the time were themselves implicated in patriarchal ideology" (13). Readers' expectations in colonial society and a writer's racial and socioeconomic background also played a role in determining how outspoken a writer might be. According to William Luis, the fear of slave uprisings, such as the successful 1791 revolt in nearby Haiti, influenced how black characters in Cuban literature were portrayed: "nonthreatening and acceptable to white readers" (53).

In Avellaneda's novel, which favors emotions over actions, Sab reveals his passion for Carlota and for individual freedom through his monologues and in a long letter, both of which are directed at Teresa. In turn, Teresa, who is typically quiet and reserved, becomes tearful and emotional with Sab's words. Sab and Teresa share with each other unrestrained emotions within certain spatial and temporal boundaries, while Carlota's emotional outpourings are constant and without limits. Despite Sab's sensitivity and passion, and the dignity and purity of his soul, his desire for Carlota remains unfulfilled due to societal norms and expectations. Sab represents an idealized tragic Romantic hero on a quest for a love denied him because of his race and social class. The novel's plot constitutes a form of tragic Romance in that all three protagonists face unfortunate ends, none of them being able to fulfill their desires and aspirations for love or personal freedom and independence. The only form of liberation for Sab and Teresa comes in death, while Carlota is left alone to endure an unhappy marriage. The isolation and suffering Sab, Carlota, and Teresa undergo are similar to what Susan Kirkpatrick calls

the Romantic paradigm of the “solitary” subject. In her book *Las Románticas: Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, 1835-1850*, Kirkpatrick discusses the various nineteenth-century Romantic paradigms for the male writer. She refers to the paradigm of the “solitary” subject who suffers alienation and turns away from the outside world.

Sab, Carlota, and Teresa occupy similar marginal positions in an oppressive patriarchal world which by means of binary colonial categories of race, gender and class prevents them from realizing their goals. Sab is limited by his race and class, while Carlota and Teresa are both restricted by their gender and class. Their marginal position in society, however, does not prevent them from desiring change or even from subverting social norms. Through Sab, the text begins to challenge traditional notions of race. The description of Sab early in the novel establishes what the text as a whole attempts to accomplish: to demonstrate how difficult and unjust it is to fix the identity of marginalized groups, in this case of women and slaves. The narrator introduces Sab through the following detailed physical description:

No parecía un criollo blanco, tampoco era negro ni podía creérsele descendiente de los primeros habitantes de las Antillas. Su rostro presentaba un compuesto singular en que se descubría el cruzamiento de dos razas diversas, y en que se amalgamaban, por decirlo así, los rasgos de la casta africana con los de la europea, sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto. (40)

His skin color is further described as “un blanco amarillento con cierto fondo oscuro,” and his features also include “su ancha frente [. . .] medio cubierta con mechones desiguales de un pelo negro y lustroso,” his aquiline nose, and “sus labios gruesos y amoratados” (40). Sab’s hybridity or “in-betweenness” is a result of a mixture of races and cultures, which creates a new identity that eludes categorization.<sup>4</sup> His unique racial composition subverts the idea that “humanity is divided into unchanging natural types,” recognizable by inherited physical features that permit distinctions to be made between “pure” and “mixed races” (Ashcroft 198).

The text further demonstrates that race is a social construct as it makes a mockery of notions such as racial purity by having Sab resemble or “mimic” his colonizer so well that the English merchant Enrique Otway initially mistakes this mulatto slave for a landowner.<sup>5</sup> During their first encounter, Sab’s linguistic eloquence, noble character, and unique physical appearance create confusion in Otway’s mind: “¿Conque eres mulato? [. . .] Bien lo sospeché al principio; pero tienes un aire tan poco común en tu clase, que luego mudé de pensamiento” (44). The ability to mimic the master and the danger this presents to the colonizing society are both a result of the education Sab received while under the care of the Bellavista family and his privileged position as a *mayoral*.<sup>6</sup> A double irony exists here in that the same references to literary influences and the Christian God that Sab uses in his rebellious discourse have also been used in the process of colonization. In his letter to Teresa written just before he dies, Sab mentions books that told of men who were free: “Un día Carlota leyó un drama en el cual encontré por fin a una noble doncella que amaba a un africano [. . .] ¡Oh, Oteló, qué ardientes simpatías encontrabas en mi corazón! ¡Pero tú también eras libre!” (190-91). Sab adds to this: “¿Es culpa mía si

Dios me ha dotado de un corazón y de un alma? ¿Si me ha concedido el amor de lo bello, el anhelo de lo justo, la ambición de lo grande?” (192). In an earlier conversation with Teresa, displaying a more rebellious and violent tone, Sab expresses his desire to escape with Carlota: “arrebatar a Carlota de los brazos de su padre, arrancarla de esa sociedad que se interpone entre los dos” (136). He also admits to thoughts of rising up against the oppressors: “arrojar en medio de ellos el terrible grito de libertad y venganza; bañarme en sangre de blancos; hollar con mis pies sus cadáveres y sus leyes” (136). All of these statements reveal the contradictions and complexities in Sab and serve to break down the assumption that there exist “unchangeable physical characteristics” that are “linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics” (Ashcroft 199). It is the difference between body and soul that becomes an ongoing conflict for Sab, who feels that while his soul is free and noble, his body is enslaved and base.

At times in the novel, Sab’s tone is one of resignation and victimization as he laments his status as a mulatto and a slave who is deprived of any choice, despite his exceptional qualities as an individual. Sab describes his skin color as “siniestro” and claims that it is “la marca de mi raza maldecida [. . .] Es el sello del oprobio y del infortunio” (144). Not only is Sab prevented from loving Carlota freely because she is a *criolla* from the landowning class, but he is denied the love and companionship of any woman because, as he says, “Ninguna mujer puede amarme, ninguna querrá unir su suerte a la del pobre mulato, seguir sus pasos y consolar sus dolores” (146). The refusal to allow a woman of *criollo* blood to marry a man like Sab is related to the idea of the “miscegenation taboo” presented in Gwen Bergner’s essay “Who is That Masked Woman?” Bergner states, “In the colonial context, the operative ‘law’ determining the circulation of women among white men and black men is the miscegenation taboo” (81). According to this principle, white men have access to black women, while black men are denied access to white women in order to protect the colonizer’s fear of miscegenation in colonial societies. While Sab is denied access to Carlota, he and Teresa maintain a close friendship, subverting to some degree the miscegenation taboo. The relationship that develops between Sab and Teresa further points to their shared marginal status in society and their “in-betweenness.” One of the most interesting examples of attempted racial subversion in the text occurs when Teresa unexpectedly offers to be Sab’s wife. She understands his heart and identifies with his marginality: both of them are orphans and both have lost in love. According to Verena Martínez-Alier’s study on marriage and race in nineteenth-century Cuba, there were “those who were either contemptuous or oblivious of the social constraints on intermarriage” even though their society “was in good part hostile to interracial marriage” (66). This attempt at asserting individual freedom of choice while undermining patriarchal and traditional hegemony regarding race, however, is immediately crushed by the sensitivity and noble character of the Romantic hero himself, who cannot love anyone but Carlota.

Even though Sab gains his freedom from slavery, his words suggest that people will nevertheless continue to judge him by his color and his inherited socioeconomic status: “Una maldición terrible pesa sobre mi existencia y está impresa en mi frente” (146). Martínez-Alier’s statement that by the nineteenth century “it had become well established that African origin implied slavery” supports Sab’s claim (80). For example, Enrique does not see the use in having an education or talent once a man is destined to be a slave. He

reacts with dissatisfaction and disapproval when Sab is invited by Carlota's father to sit at the dinner table with the Bellavista family. As the novel progresses, Sab's efforts at subversion are thwarted by the limitations and conventions of colonial society. He relinquishes any ideas of rebellion as he realizes that he is less powerful than the system of oppression. The text increasingly characterizes Sab as a tragic Romantic hero, evidenced by his failed quest, intense suffering, and death. Rather than follow the typical Romantic mode of emplotment which, as described by Hayden White, consists of the hero's transcendence of the world of experience and the triumph of good over evil, the text highlights only certain moments of victory within a larger framework that is essentially tragic. Sab's failure to win Carlota's love and his subsequent death overshadow the temporary triumph of his freedom from slavery.

The text subverts notions of race through Carlota and Martina also. Carlota's utopian vision of a past in which Cuba's native population lived happily and in harmony with nature carries over into her life when she appropriates indigenous identity as her own. Carlota exclaims: "¡Oh, Enrique! Lloro no haber nacido entonces y que tú, indio como yo, me hicieras una cabaña de palmas en donde gozásemos una vida de amor, de inocencia y de libertad" (102). In this passage, the text's subversion of race is expressed by a *criolla* woman who not only wishes to live the life of an Amerindian, but who also adopts the identity of the indigenous. The possibility of racial subversion by Carlota eventually dissolves since this is the only moment in the text when she desires to be Amerindian, and even in this instance she is essentially reproducing the "noble savage" colonizing stereotype of the Other.

Similar to Carlota's racial identity reversal is the transformation undergone by an elderly Amerindian woman named Martina. Martina, like Sab, is a character who exemplifies racial ambiguity and subverts racial categorization and binary divisions of race. The text describes her as a descendent of the legendary cacique Camagüey, yet this characterization is subverted when, according to the narrator, the only feature that matches her alleged indigenous origin is her skin tone:

la parte calva de su cabeza contrastaba de una manera singular, por su lustre y blancura, con el color casi cetrino de su rostro. Este color, empero, era todo lo que podía alegar a favor de sus pretensiones de india, pues ninguno de los rasgos de su fisonomía parecía corresponder a su pretendido origen. (108)

Martina's racial characterization undermines race-related notions when, at the end of the novel, a link between Carlota and Martina is suggested by the ambiguity concerning the true identity of a female figure that visits Sab's grave nightly. Even though the woman who continues to visit Sab's grave after Martina's death is described as young and white, the villagers assume that it is Martina, but the text leaves some ambiguity as to the true identity of the mysterious vision:

pues los que la habían sorprendido en su visita nocturna aseguraban que no era ya vieja, ni flaca, ni de color aceitunado, sino joven, blanca y hermosa cuanto podía conjeturarse, pues siempre tenía cubierto el rostro con una gasa. (197)

In addition to questioning the categories and construct of race, Sab's characterization subverts established ideas regarding gender. While maintaining his status as the novel's hero, Sab undermines gender stereotypes and binary divisions between male and female by undergoing a process of feminization. Sab's feminization begins when Carlota categorizes him as a "superior soul," an individual capable of love and full of passion and virtue. As far as Carlota is concerned, men such as Enrique do not belong to this category. Carlota's admiration of people who can love and are full of passion and virtue as well as Teresa's respect for Sab's noble character are examples of how the women in the novel are attracted to a person's soul rather than to his or her physical appearance. Sab's attraction to Carlota's pure soul shows how he is feminized and once again characterized according to the values held by his female counterparts. In the cases of Carlota and Teresa, the interior/exterior dichotomy of soul and body is broken by the direct correlation between their physical traits and their souls. Unlike the men in the novel, the women represent the Romantic notion that an individual's physical appearance is directly related to his or her soul. Carlota's passionate and pure soul mirrors her exterior beauty and wealth, while Teresa's typically reserved character parallels her plain physical traits. Sab is the exception among the males in the text because of his unusual capacity for love and passion, which is mirrored in his unique physical appearance. Sab expresses his sympathy for women, who share the same plight and destiny as slaves. As a slave, Sab is feminized by this comparison with women since both groups are treated as inferior and marginal by society. Sab, like Carlota and Teresa, is measured according to his economic value, viewed as a commodity and treated as the property of men. As Lorna Valerie Williams suggests, however, nineteenth-century society encouraged women to reinforce a slave's subordinate status by allowing them to dominate the realm of emotions and exert emotional control over the slave. Williams points out how the following quote reveals this connection in Sab between emotional subservience and social bondage: "Desde mi infancia fui escriturado a la señorita Carlota: soy esclavo suyo, y quiero vivir y morir en su servicio" (46). In the end, the subversion of gender is undermined due to the power of a patriarchal colonial system that renders its subjects powerless.

Carlota and Teresa's subversion of gender is limited by their socioeconomic position. Throughout the novel, both of these women remain bound by their economic worth. Carlota fulfills her destiny as a wealthy *criolla* woman by marrying Enrique, while the orphaned Teresa remains economically dependent on the Bellavista family. Enrique's treatment of Carlota represents Gayatri Spivak's idea of the "commodification of women" in colonial society. The fact that he views Carlota as a piece of merchandise to be owned explains why he only wants to marry her for her wealth and use her to improve his social and economic status. Teresa's role in society is also that of a commodity, and her only way of escaping this status is by entering a convent, where she will no longer be an economic burden to her adopted family. Even though Carlota and Teresa are aware of their inferior position in society and Carlota discovers in the end that Enrique only

married her for economic purposes, the text resigns them to the traditional feminine destinies of marriage and convent life. Carlota and Teresa, like Sab, are subdued by society's will.

The novel's three main characters attempt in limited ways to subvert established associations of class, but, as with race and gender, their rebellious intentions are constrained by the forces of tradition and patriarchal domination. In a rush of nostalgia and sentimentality, Carlota declares that she would be happy as an indigenous person surviving off the land, yet her destiny is to suffer the effects of her double colonization as a woman and as a colonial subject. Teresa dares to escape from the entrapment of her class-conscious society by doing something unusual for a woman of her time and class: she offers to be Sab's wife. Since Sab does not accept this offer and Teresa is an orphan without a dowry, she settles for the seclusion of convent life. Sab subverts class categories and expectations by falling in love with a woman who is outside and above his own class, but once more society's control prevails, leaving him to suffer and die alone. In the end, none of these three potentially revolutionary protagonists transcends the categories of class assigned to them.

Avellaneda's initial project is itself subverted through the text's need to fetishize its characters in their relationships with each other. The desire to fix a meaning to a person or object is expressed in the novel by both the colonizer and the colonized. Carlota, as a member of the native colonizer class, fetishizes the indigenous people by relating to them only as a type of "noble savage." She describes them as "hijos de la naturaleza" who enjoy "una vida de amor, de inocencia y de libertad" (102). Similarly, the Amerindian woman Martina is fetishized by Sab and Carlota, the farmers who respect and admire her, and the *criollos* who all attribute magical powers to this indigenous woman and describe her as "legendary." Admired for her immense wisdom, her knowledge of medicine, her storytelling abilities, and her prophecies, she becomes an idealization and an embodiment of the "noble savage" stereotype.

Like the Amerindians, the land and the women in the novel are fetishized. Enrique's interest in the land for exploitation and profit also reflects his attitude toward Carlota: she is simply another commodity that fulfills his expectations for a passive, idealized female. Women's value in this novel lies, as Bergner suggests, "not in their use but in their possession" (81). Sab also fetishizes Carlota, who fulfills his expectations for beauty and harmony, by making her an object of his passion and devotion. Teresa's identity is stereotyped as the orphan without a dowry whose constant placement in juxtaposition to Carlota serves only to highlight Carlota's beauty and wealth. Sab, another object of fetishism in the novel, receives the devotion and admiration of the women. To Carlota, Teresa, and Martina, Sab represents a noble and pure soul who is often compared to an angel. Finally, it is the text itself which most fetishizes Sab as a tragic Romantic hero, especially once it is known that Enrique will marry Carlota and Sab's chances of having her by his side even in the former slave-master relationship are dissolved. All that is left for Sab is to die, and when he does, all hope and all chances of rebellion for both women and slaves die as well.

On the one hand, *Sab* successfully critiques the tyrannies of race, gender, and class that deny its characters the freedom they seek, but on the other hand, the novel subverts its potential as an effective feminist and abolitionist text. As Nina M. Scott indicates in her introduction to *Sab*, Avellaneda “was among the most outspoken” of the female Spanish American authors of her time on both issues of slavery and on the similar situation of dependency and servitude of women (xxiv). Yet Scott also points out that *Sab*’s feminism overshadows its anti-slavery message. I would add that the text’s underlying tension between subversion and the thwarting of subversion and its conformity to Romantic novelistic conventions and societal expectations undermine the text’s feminism and abolitionist message. In the end, both the characters and the text comply with socially and artistically assigned roles and conventions. This compliance further suggests that Avellaneda’s text is trapped not only by the same moral and social conventions that prevent its characters from succeeding in their goals, but also by the literary conventions of Avellaneda’s chosen genre, the Romantic novel. The fact that *Sab*’s characters fail to overcome oppression and that they resign themselves to traditional stereotyped roles raises a problematic question: What does the characters’ resignation suggest about Avellaneda’s message of social criticism? As a woman and a writer living in a colonial patriarchal society, did Avellaneda feel the same futility in her struggle that her characters felt toward their oppressors? Whether Avellaneda felt this or not is impossible to know, but what is evident through this analysis of *Sab* is that Avellaneda, like her characters, was incapable of completely overcoming the expectations of her colonial society and the male-dominated Romantic literary conventions of the early nineteenth century. She did, however, construct a unique text based on the underlying tension between subversion and the thwarting of subversion.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cuba did not gain its independence from Spain until 1898. Due to the lucrative sugar business in the Caribbean, there was an increase in the importation of African slaves to Cuba even though treaties on the abolition of the slave trade were established between Spain and England in 1817 and 1820. Slavery was not abolished in Cuba until 1886. For background information related to *Sab*, see Nina M. Scott's "Introduction" to *Sab and Autobiography* and Catherine Davies' "Introduction" to *Sab*.
- <sup>2</sup> Scott explains that *Sab* was banned in Cuba due to its antislavery discourse and was finally published in Cuba in the definitive edition of Avellaneda's complete works in 1914 (xxiii). Davies mentions, however, that *Sab* appeared in the Cuban review *El museo* in 1883 (10).
- <sup>3</sup> *Criolla* or *criollo* refers to a person of Hispanic ancestry born in the Americas. It does not, as Scott points out, imply mixed racial ancestry (149).
- <sup>4</sup> Hybridity is defined in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* as "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (118). According to Homi K. Bhabha, cultural identity is created in a space, or what Mary Louise Pratt refers to as a "contact zone" (4), that is contradictory and ambivalent. *Sab* acts from within this "in-between" space, a space between colonizer and colonized, black and *criollo*, and as is discussed later in this essay, between feminine and masculine.
- <sup>5</sup> As stated in Ashcroft, et al., colonial discourse has often encouraged the colonized subject to "mimic" the colonizer "by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values" (139). The result of mimicry is a "blurred copy" of the colonizer, which either parodies or threatens the colonial discourse. For further reading on mimicry see the various essays contained in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.
- <sup>6</sup> For a definition of *mayoral*, I will quote directly from Scott as she explains it in *Sab and Autobiography*: "'Mayoral' is the title given to the chief administrator who directs and presides over the slave's work. It is very rare for another slave to be assigned to this position; when it occurs it is considered the highest honor which can be given him" (151).

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