

◆ Afterword

Of the Margins and the Center: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda

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Gertrudis Gómez Avellaneda's most famous literary work, *Sab*, opens with a line from the popular Spanish dramatist of the eighteenth century, José de Cañizares: "¿Quién eres? ¿Cuál es tu patria?" (38) ("Who are you? What is your homeland" [*Sab*, Scott, 27]). This is a question that might very well be posed of Gómez de Avellaneda's own life and work and which surfaces throughout this valuable collection of essays. Gómez de Avellaneda was born in Cuba in 1814 to a Spanish naval officer and Cuban mother and lived on the island until moving to Spain in 1836, where she spent most of her adult life, and wrote and published the vast majority of her work. Whilst Gómez de Avellaneda's life straddled two continents, her literary output is profoundly oriented toward Latin America. As this collection stresses, she published not only the first abolitionist novel of the Americas—her great anti-slavery work, *Sab*, which is set in a lushly tropical Cuba—but across much of her writing was fascinated with Latin America, particularly that moment of first encounter between the Old and New Worlds, especially in *Guatimozín. Último Emperador de México*, which relates the story of the Conquest of Mexico.

As the lines from Cañizares above suggest, national identity is one of the persistent concerns of *Sab*, a novel in which few if any characters can claim native roots: the eponymous slave is partly of African heritage, Enrique Otway, the handsome lover of the heroine, is of English ancestry, and Carlota herself is *criolla*. The single figure of putative Amerindian descent is Martina, whose only proof of this genealogy is her color, "pues ninguno de los rasgos de su fisonomía parecía corresponder a su pretendido origen" (108) ("for none of her facial features appeared to match her alleged origin" [*Sab*, Scott 78]). Like the garden planted by Sab at the Bellavista plantation in honor of his beloved Carlota, the design of which follows neither a nativist stance nor

English nor French fashion, but rather contains plants of all origins, from temperate favorites like the rose to the archetypally tropical banana tree, this is a book in which national belonging is profoundly complex.

The narrative form of the novel itself shares this sense of dislocation: of being neither Spanish nor fully Cuban. “Although written in Madrid, *Sab* is a Cuban novel,” Catherine Davies asserts (2). Yet whilst the novel was conceived of and indeed started in Cuba before Gómez de Avellaneda set off for Spain, the narrative voice vacillates between the perspective of an insider and an outsider: as Adriana Méndez Rodenas stresses in this collection, the narrator displays a “detached and an engaged perspective, as if the novel was written with both a *criollo* and a peninsular audience in mind” (156). Accounts of the tropical landscape display both an intimate knowledge of nature, a lived experience of a place seen close up over many years, whilst also often imagining it from the point of view of the traveler, as when, for instance, the narrator describes in Part I, chapter XI how “El viajero, que transita por dicho camino [Paso de los Paredones (Davies 120, note 92)], no puede levantar la vista hacia la altura sin grandes moles” (120) (“The traveler who journeyed by this path could not lift his eyes on high without feeling vertigo” [*Sab*, Scott 87]). At other times the topographical descriptions are modulated by Romantic appeals to the sublime or the picturesque. According to Beatriz Rivera-Barnes, living in Spain the author “began to [. . .] construct the Cuban environment just as a Spaniard would” (70), with awed reverence for an exotic, tropical world. Both Rivera-Barnes (68) and Thomas Ward (99) compare the tendency of the novel’s narrator to enumerate natural features to colonial tracts like Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* (1535). In the opening chapter of the novel, the narrator presents a superabundant nature, redolent of the colonial *relato* and infused with the discourse of the ‘marvellous’—a concept which permeated all areas of writing on the New World and, as Stephen Greenblatt has argued, denoted “the presence [. . .] of a world of objects that exceed[ed] [the] understanding of the probable and the familiar” (75). In the tradition of colonial travel writing the narrator of *Sab* evokes how:

Bandadas de golondrinas se cruzaban en todas direcciones buscando su albergue nocturno, y el verde papagayo con sus franjas de oro y de grana, el cao de un negro nítido y brillante, el carpintero real de férrea lengua y matizado plumaje, la alegre guacamaya, el ligero tomeguín, la tornasolada mariposa y otra infinidad de aves indígenas, posaban en las ramas del tamarindo y del mango aromatic. (39)

(Flocks of swallows crossed and recrossed in all directions in search of their night’s refuge; the green parrot, banded with gold and scarlet, the

crow, distinctly black and lustrous, the royal woodpecker, of iron tongue and muted plumage, the blithe macaw, the swift *tomeguín*, the iridescent butterfly, and a whole host of native birds alighted in the branches of the tamarind and aromatic mango trees. [*Sab*, Scott 27])

Here we have clear echoes of Columbus's first enraptured accounts of the New World in his "Diario del primer viaje" (1492), of the "aves y pajaritos de tantas maneras y tan diversas de las nuestras que es maravilla" (110) (birds so various and different from our birds that it is a marvel [my translation]). The account of avian life also anticipates the tendency to catalogue nature, a feature of the Plinian tradition of colonial chroniclers like Oviedo through to the Latin American *novela de la tierra* in the hands of Rómulo Gallegos and José Eustasio Rivera, among others. The narrator presents Cuba's birds to a reader from beyond the island's shores, evoking their abundance and ebullience, just as elsewhere the landscape is depicted in terms which are archetypally Romantic.

Much of this collection highlights the Romantic qualities of *Sab* and of Avellaneda's work in general—qualities which seem to be in line with what Méndez calls her 'detached' perspective on the New World. The "Introduction" stresses the central position of the author in Hispanic Romanticism, both as a playwright, poet, and novelist. Her work is replete with Romantic heroes and heroines, from Moctezuma or Cortés in *Guatimozín* to Leoncia in the play of the same name, discussed by Alexander Selimov in this volume. Selimov shows how Avellaneda appeals to Romantic discourse in *Leoncia*—a discourse usually dominated by male characters and writers in the nineteenth century—to forge the eponymous female protagonist. In her relationship with a young man called Carlos, Leoncia is shown, like many Romantic heroes (in the words of Lilian R. Furst) to "welcome even exceptional sorrow or dramatic misfortune" (103). The tragic outcome of the play—which ends in suicide and desperation—fits with the Romantic hero's predisposition to be controlled by fate and inclined to tragedy.

The Romanticism of *Sab* is manifold. The essay by Julia C. Paulk draws on Elena Grau-Llevería's definition of Social Romanticism (where an individual is seen to struggle against the abuses and privileges of society) to show how the protagonists of *Sab* identify themselves with a group which is in some sense limited by social institutions and mores. Martina's laments on behalf of the vanquished former inhabitants of Cuba or *Sab*'s railing against slavery are examples of this. And as a number of critics have pointed out, *Sab* himself fits into the pattern of the black hero of Romantic texts such as Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* (1826). But more than any other aspect of *Sab*, it is the descriptions of the natural environment which typify the author's relationship to European Romanticism. Chapter V, which takes its epigraph from the José María Heredia's poem "En una tempestad," draws on one of the set pieces of

nineteenth-century Romantic writing on the tropics: the storm. Alexander von Humboldt, whose travels in South America are credited by Mary Louise Pratt with the “reinvention” of America (111–143), holds up a night spent out in the open during a “fearful thunderstorm” in *Views of Nature: The Sublime Phenomena of Creation* as a crystallization of the sublime. In Avellaneda’s novel, the inclusion of a tropical storm not only has important consequences for the plot (Carlota’s lover Enrique narrowly escapes death when his horse takes fright and knocks him off his saddle) but seems to position the novel within a European tradition of tropical nature writing:

La tempestad estalla por fin súbitamente. Al soplo impetuoso de los vientos desencadenados el polvo de los campos se levanta en sofocantes torbellinos: el cielo se abre vomitando fuego por innumerables bocas: el relámpago describe mil ángulos encendidos: el rayo troncha los más corpulentos árboles y la atmósfera encendida semeja una vasta hoguera. (70)

(At last the storm broke. Suddenly, at the impetuous gust of the unleashed winds, the dust of the fields rose in suffocating spirals. The heavens opened, spewing fire through innumerable openings. Lightning described a thousand fiery angles, its bolts shattering the thickest trees, and the burning atmosphere was like a huge conflagration. [*Sab*, Scott 50])

Here tropical nature is powerful and sinister, personified as a fire-breathing beast. A number of critics have pointed out the proximity of *Sab* to classics of European Romanticism by, for example, Chateaubriand (Schlau 498) and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (Servera 55). Carlota’s fantasy about living in a simple hut with her lover enjoying “una vida de amor, de inocencia y de libertad” (102) (“a life of love, innocence, and freedom” [*Sab*, Scott 74]) reminds one of Chactas’s plea to the heroine of *Atala* that they “build a hut . . . and hide . . . away forever” (Chateaubriand 46) and, as Jenna Leving Jacobson points out in this volume, shares some of the characteristics of what Cintio Vitier has called “la falsedad romántica importada” (imported romantic falsehood) leading to “una especie de auto-exotismo imperdonable” (191) (a kind of inexcusable auto-exoticism).

Despite its proximity to Romantic texts from a European tradition, however, the novel remains palpably Latin American. Pratt’s essay in this volume shows that Avellaneda maintained a critical distance from Romanticism throughout her oeuvre, creating what Pratt calls “per-versions” (270) of canonical Romantic works, including poems by Heredia. Méndez’s essay in this volume shows how many of the natural descriptions in *Sab* are not merely concerned with parroting European classics, but work to preserve the still largely untouched rural interior of Cuba and denounce the destruction of other areas

of the island by the sugar industry. The essay shows the concern of the author with the widespread destruction of Cuba's landscapes, especially forests, and situates the melancholic evocation of the plantation Bellavista, threatened by the imperatives of sugar production, as part of a broader "yearning for lost landscapes" (Paravisini-Gebert) in Caribbean fiction. The novel is certainly filled with wistful references to the "prodigiosa fertilidad" (97) ("prodigious fertility" [*Sab*, Scott 71]) of the landscape, corresponding to a long-held idealization of the New World as a paradise where there is no necessity for work, expressed most concretely by Carlota as she mourns the passing of the island's original inhabitants: "Aquí vivían felices e inocentes aquellos hijos de la naturaleza: este suelo virgen no necesitaba ser regado con el sudor de los esclavos para producirles: ofreciales por todas partes sombras y frutos, aguas y flores" (102) ("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" [*Sab*, Scott 73]).

This is reminiscent of Andrés Bello's 1826 "Silva a la agricultura en la zona tórrida," in which the classical motif of the Golden Age is invoked in the poem's opening to convey the generosity of a tropical nature which does not require human toil: "el banano, primero / de cuantas concedió bellos presents / Providencia a las gentes / de Ecuador feliz con mano larga. / No ya de humanas artes obligado el premio rinde opimo" (Bello 48) ("Banana, first / of all the plants that Providence has offered / to happy tropic's folk with generous hand; it asks no human arts, but freely yields / its fruit" [Bello, Jaksić 30]). Yet in Bello's poem as in Carlota's impassioned lament, there is a suppression of the reality of slavery—"escasa industria bástale, cual puede / hurtar a sus fatigas mano esclava" (Bello 48) ("No care does it require, only such heed / as a slave's hand can steal from daily toil" [Bello, Jaksić 30])—a reality made explicit from the start of *Sab* when the protagonist points out that even when "la naturaleza descansa" (42) ("nature rests" [*Sab*, Scott 29]), "el esclavo va a regar con su sudor y con sus lágrimas al recinto donde la noche no tiene sombras, ni la brisa frescura" (42) ("the slave with his sweat and tears waters the place where neither the night has shadows nor the breeze freshness" [*Sab*, Scott 29]). Just as we are not allowed to forget the brutal reality of slavery in the novel, we are also disbarred from engaging too readily with Romantic descriptions of Cuban scenery. This is a landscape on the verge of change—the shift toward what Benítez Rojo calls "Cuba grande" (15–16), and the decimation of all those trees, majestic *ceibas* and palms—referenced in the novel's pages.

Sab is not the only of Avellaneda's works concerned with topography. Catharina Vallejo in this volume has explored Avellaneda's other travel writing, in particular three *tradiciones* which the author gathered during trips to the Basque land and Pyrenees in the late 1850s. Vallejo situates Avellaneda as a woman and a Romantic subject, both of which define her as marginal

(Spanish Romanticism, she explains, was a result of the country's marginalization—geographically in Europe, as well as historically and culturally). The persona of the female traveller is an important strand of Vallejo's exposition: the essay is concerned with the 'presence' of Avellaneda in her travel writing—the dual role she plays as both the recipient of the story (several she gleaned from tour guides) and as the author of the present text. This, it is shown, is related closely to Avellaneda's self-positioning as a woman. Within the stories, the expression of feelings—one of the hallmarks of femininity—is a central part of the author's presence. On the other hand, the stories are silent about the more material manifestations of presence—eyes, which give rise to vision, or the brain, responsible for feelings, prioritizing the immaterial, the spiritual over material substance, in line with Western philosophical thinking from Romanticism on.

The presence of Avellaneda in her writing is, of course, a subject that has attracted a good deal of critical attention. Doris Sommer's chapter on *Sab* in her groundbreaking *Foundational Fictions* is entitled "Sab C'est Moi" and argues that through her mulatto protagonist Avellaneda was able to "construct a paradoxical, interstitial, and ultimately new or American persona [. . .]. Neither Old World nor New World, neither a woman's writer nor a man's, Gertrudis was both, or something different; she was Sab" (114).¹ Part of this identification, Sommer argues, rests on Sab's and Avellaneda's shared endeavor at authorship and their struggle to overturn the social order—whether that relating to master-slave or male-female relations. In his examination of quite a different genre—Avellaneda's letters to her lover, the Andalusian law student Ignacio de Cepeda y Alcalde whom she met in 1838—Emil Volek in this volume also considers the presence of the author in her writing. Much of the essay considers the ways in which life and literature collide and considers the 'paratexts' of the Cuban's amorous epistles—the extracts of poems, for instance, not included in anthologies of the letters but which provide a valuable insight into the author's processes of composition and 'narrative voice.' The letters, like much twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, pose questions about narrative reliability and the divide between autobiographical and non-autobiographical works. Volek reminds us that the worlds of letters and novels overlap: "both are written creations" (289) and that *Sab* is a novel in which fact as well as fiction obtains.

Avellaneda's presence in *Sab* is at times explicit, as when she directly addresses the reader in the opening "Dos palabras al lector" ("A Word to the Reader" [*Sab*, Scott 26]), a prologue which underplays the significance of her work as a "novelita" (36) ("little novel" [*Sab*, Scott 26]). Yet it is not only history which has judged *Sab* to be, as claimed in the introduction to this volume, a "pioneer anti-slavery novel" (5): *Sab* was notably banned in Cuba when it was first published for its controversial portrayal of slavery. A number of

critics have discussed the narrative voice in the novel, identified by Davies as that of a woman given her views on marriage and male-female relations (27). Although some criticism has tended to view the novel as *either* abolitionist *or* feminist, as Julia C. Paulk's essay in this volume stresses, these two positions, far from being incompatible, are mutually reinforcing: "each protest against discrimination strengthens the other and arises from a sense of the many injustices colonial Cuban society supported" (148). Both Sab and Carlota, in their different ways, suffer the yoke of slavery and a lack of freewill. Indeed, as Sab famously declares in his letter to Teresa, women might even be regarded as less fortunate than slaves since "El esclavo al menos puede cambiar de amo, puede esperar que juntando oro comprará algún día su libertad; pero la mujer, cuando levanta sus manos enflaquecidas y su frente ultrajada, para pedir libertad, oye al monstruo de voz sepulchral que le grita: 'En la tumba'" (194) ("The slave can at least change masters, can even hope to buy his freedom some day if he can save enough money, but a woman, when she lifts her careworn hands and mistreated brow to beg for release, hears the monstrous, deathly voice which cries out to her: 'In the grave'" [*Sab*, Scott 145]). This is a view, as Pratt's essay confirms, which was shared by the author who admitted in her *Autobiografía* that her "horror al matrimonio era extremado" (268) (horror of marriage was extreme). Although she did marry, this perspective, Pratt argues, places her in a long tradition of female writers, from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to Rosario Castellanos, who regarded marriage as a restriction on their personal freedom.

Although Avellaneda was, as the "Introduction" reminds us, credited with having a "male genius" (10) and through her writing was able to overcome some of the restrictions placed on women in the nineteenth century, the plight of her sex in a patriarchal society was an abiding concern for Avellaneda. Selimov's essay, for instance, shows that the play *Leoncia* is primarily concerned with female virtue or the perceived lack thereof. Because of the protagonist's past (she was seduced as a young woman and bore a child), Leoncia cannot be considered virtuous—a discrepancy for which Avellaneda blames patriarchal society. Through reference to *Sab*, the essay shows that the role of women under patriarchy is parallel to that of a slave in a plantation culture where a monetary value is placed on the body (in *Leoncia*, on female virginity). This concern is shown to rhyme with a general awakening in other mid-nineteenth-century writing, by both men and women, to the plight of women and in particular with Avellaneda's own personal experience, her love affair with Cepeda, which ended in heartbreak. Pratt's essay also draws out Avellaneda's feminist credentials and the presence of this in her writing in which she developed a "poetics of insubordination and unsubordinated desire," (270) which questioned gender relations and the restrictions imposed on her as a woman.

This "insubordination" can also be traced in a number of Avellaneda's

indigenous American characters. Jacobson's essay in this volume resists readings of *Sab* as a national romance by suggesting that the indigenous woman, Martina, far from assisting in a process of national reconciliation and racial integration, reminds the reader of the violence of the Conquest and that underpinning present-day slavery in Cuba. Sab and Martina's non-biological mother/son relationship disrupts the romantic, productive ties fitting of the nineteenth-century romance and Martina's vision of the vengeance of her alleged forebear, the *cacique* Camagüey, foretells not of a future of national reconciliation but one of violence and retribution. As Rogelia Lily Ibarra shows in her essay, in *Guatimozín*, Avellaneda also employs an Aztec woman to overturn gender stereotypes of female inferiority and submission, when Quilena goes into battle against the Spaniards, and is shown beheading her enemies and drinking their blood. Ibarra maintains that one of the primary concerns of Avellaneda is to contest the Sarmientan trope of civilization and barbarism, applied by Europeans in the Americas from the time of the Conquest. Through a rewriting, or better reemphasis, on the key colonial accounts of the Conquest of Mexico, indigenous culture is presented as in many cases more civilized than that of their European observers.

Nevertheless, the image of the female cannibal warrior might also be seen to appeal to entrenched images of the Amerindian as a savage cannibal. Peter Hulme has argued that "Human beings who eat other human beings have always been placed on the very borders of humanity" (14): the Aztec warrior may prove that she is the equal of any man but falls short of being human. Whilst many of the essays in this collection present the radicalism of Avellaneda's works—whether it is *Guatimozín*, *Sab*, or, as delineated in Pratt's essay, subversive rewritings of Heredia—at times we glimpse another side of the author. Mariselle Meléndez's essay, which examines Avellaneda's view of the colonial past through the portrayal of historical characters such as Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés, as well as stock figures like the Spanish *visitador* and female black slave, shows how the author sometimes sympathized with and even lauded Spanish colonial figures. An examination of her 1862 hymn to celebrate the erection of a statue of Columbus in the Cuban town of Cárdenas, for example, surprisingly reveals the writer's view of him as, in the words of Meléndez, a "great man" (216), responsible for uniting Europe and the Americas. The essay also explores how in the 1869 tale "Una anécdota de la vida de Cortés," the conquistador is held up as a hero who brought civilization and Christianity to Mexico. And despite the position of *Sab* as an anti-slavery novel, in the legend "El cacique de Turmequé" (1869) the black slave is shown to be deeply untrustworthy and a facilitator of her mistress's dishonor.

Whilst, as Meléndez outlines, such works can be contextualized by Avellaneda's concern with the souring and potential severing of Cuba's relationship with Spain in the mid-nineteenth century, this essay offers an import-

ant reminder of the complexities of identity and national belonging evinced throughout Gómez de Avellaneda's works. Whilst identifying herself strongly with Cuba and Latin America, Gómez de Avellaneda was also capable of deep loyalty toward Spain and of using her writing as a tool for acknowledging and preserving the country's relationship with its colonial outposts. Nevertheless, as this important volume shows, Gómez de Avellaneda was by instinct a radical, provocative writer, especially on questions of race and gender. The "Introduction" by Albin, Corbin, and Marrero-Fente suitably casts the Cuban as trail-blazer, before her time in so many of her views. And her writing style was also radical, as Pratt and Volek (both in this volume), among others, have shown, displaying literary tendencies which can be seen as more modern than Romantic, anticipating *modernismo* in Hispanic America. In this, as in so many other aspects of her life and work, Avellaneda resists binary definitions: she was a figure of the margins and of the center: a Romantic with modern propensities, a Cuban in Spain, and a woman in a man's world.

Notes

1. Williams, however, argues that "Avellaneda can be identified neither consistently nor exclusively with her protagonist; his voice is not always hers. On the contrary, there are moments when the novelist seems to deliberately distance herself from him by allowing other characters to critique his postures and to point the way to 'right' thinking and action" (163).

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Wylie, Lesley. "Of the Margins and the Center: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda." *Gender and the Politics of Literature: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda*. Ed. María C. Albin, Megan Corbin, and Raúl Marrero-Fente. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 18 (2017): 297–306. Web.
