

### Picturing Cuba: Romantic Ecology in Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841)

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As the bay of Santiago de Cuba receded from view, a young Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda penned her most famous sonnet, “Al partir,” to commemorate her departure from Cuba on April 9, 1836 (*Antología poética* 29). At the start of a long sea-crossing to Spain, the lyrical subject of “Al partir” voices an emotive farewell echoed among generations of Cubans who live outside the island. In much the same way as her precursor, poet José María Heredia, the first to view his country from afar, Gómez de Avellaneda recalls the sounds and sites of her native island precisely at the point when these beloved places begin to fade from view. Rather than glimpse the palms of her native island amidst the waterfalls, as Heredia had done in the memorable verses of “Oda al Niágara,” Gómez de Avellaneda pictures Cuba as “an edén querido” (29) (an endearing paradise), recreating the essence and ambience of the island in a timeless present. Inscribed on the insular imaginary since Columbus’s *Diary*, this Edenic trope marks the location (or dislocation) of the lyrical subject as she anticipates her distance from the privileged place of origin: “Do quier que el hado en su furor me impele / tu dulce nombre halagará mi oído” (*Antología poética* 29) (no matter where blind fate leads me, your sweet name will always delight my ear). For Severo Sarduy, a contemporary Cuban writer also born in Camagüey, “Al partir” shifts the poem’s register from the visual to the auditive, since the absence from the island is ciphered by the acoustic trace it left behind (20). For Sarduy, the movement from the visual to the auditive marks, in his view, Gómez de Avellaneda’s unique contribution to the discourse of nationhood (20).<sup>1</sup>

Gómez de Avellaneda’s coming-of-age in Camagüey, in the interior of the island, and her subsequent literary fame in Seville and Madrid make her both a transnational Cuban writer as well as a model of transatlantic Romanticism.

Perhaps in imitation of Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Gómez de Avellaneda dubs herself "la peregrina" (the pilgrim), a self-fashioning surfacing behind the lyrical "I" of "Al partir" caught between two seas in the passage from the Caribbean to the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup>

Although Gómez de Avellaneda's literary career straddles Cuba and Spain, her first novel is thematically aligned with the anti-slavery novels written by members of the Del Monte circle, a literary salon that gathered in Havana beginning in 1835. It was under Del Monte's leadership and within the chambers of this august *tertulia* (literary salon) that Cuban literature got its start. Works like Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco o las delicias del campo* (1839) and Félix Tanco's "Escenas de la vida privada en la isla de Cuba" (1925) hinge, like *Sab*, on racial desire: vengeful masters who prey on female domestic slaves use their class and racial privilege to force them into submission. In contrast, Gómez de Avellaneda shifts gender and dares to show a slave in love with his white mistress, thrusting the violence of colonialism and slavery onto the shoulders of a long-suffering "noble slave." In picturing a cultured, spiritually evolved, and racially mixed slave, the young expatriate went beyond Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), whose *mulata* protagonist, in love with her white half-brother, becomes the symbol of Cuban nationality. By reverting the prevailing code of anti-slavery narrative, and introducing a miscegenated Sab as an icon of Cuban nationality, Gómez de Avellaneda shows the "desire for the nation" as well as the "desire for racial integration" prevalent in Caribbean literature (Benítez Rojo, "Power/Sugar/Literature" 26–28, 35). Yet Gómez de Avellaneda is often excluded from the anti-slavery tradition for the simple fact that she did not live in Cuba (Luis 4–5); moreover, her use of a Romantic aesthetic rather than the Balzacian high realism promoted by Del Monte is often misunderstood as countering the fledging writers' efforts to denounce slavery under oppressive conditions.<sup>3</sup> As the first anti-slavery novel in the Americas, *Sab* is linked to a broader continental network of female-authored abolitionist narrative that fostered a sense of the African's human dignity ([2001] 16–17).

As a transnational Cuban writer, Gómez de Avellaneda is aligned with a pair of foreign artists—the Spaniard Víctor Landaluze and the French Frédéric Miahle—whose colorful sketches of the streets of Havana are filled with plazas, *paseos* (promenades), theaters, market-places, and public spaces where emerging national subjects appear framed within the pictorial conventions of the picturesque. But whereas Landaluze and Miahle provide an urban topography, Gómez de Avellaneda turns her gaze to the interior of Cuba, to the geographic center of the island, where the natural beauty of the land provides an idyllic setting for the emergence of creole (*criollo*) values; as we shall see, the fictional Bellavista plantation is also the perfect setting for a tale of unrequited love.

*Sab* has appealed to countless generations of readers by its racially tinged

romance. Among its most salient features, critics have noted the novel's "pallimpsest" effect, the way it voices a resistance to slavery while denouncing women's submissive condition under patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> The novel links women and slaves by their shared, if differently weighed, double condition of bondage, hence articulating the connection between patriarchy and colonialism. Critics have also emphasized the overlapping of two passionate triangles to weave the sentimental plot of the novel (Kirkpatrick 147): Sab and Enrique are rivals for the love of Carlota, and both Carlota and her adopted sister Teresa make the hapless Enrique their one obsessive choice. As the plot unfolds, the male characters contradict readerly expectations regarding gender and race. Enrique Otway, son of a British merchant and a white Anglo-Saxon, is depicted as a "dark" or "inferior" soul, while Sab, who is hinted to be the illegitimate son of Don Luis, his master's brother, is racially black, yet he appears as "elevated" and "noble," the embodiment of a "superior" spirit ([1973] 126, 133).<sup>5</sup> The two rivals for Carlota's affection are at two extremes not only in terms of race, but, most importantly, in terms of ethical temperament; whereas Enrique is steeped in crass materiality, Sab is capable of altruistic sacrifice for the object of his love. The two female figures are similarly opposed, as Teresa's cold reserve and serious demeanor is countered by Carlota's overly affective temperament, vulnerability, and impetuosity.<sup>6</sup> Although Sab clearly stands out as Romantic hero, all four main characters participate in Romantic subjectivity to the extent of their involvement in the ethos and pathos of love.

Still eliciting fresh readings after two-hundred years, I want to focus on the role played by tropical nature in the novel, a topic that has gone largely unnoticed.<sup>7</sup> Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* constructs a "spatial imaginary," a way of picturing Cuba as "edén querido" (beloved Eden), an idyllic trope that depicts the island—and particularly, the interior of the island, its geographic center—as Edenic landscape. In this visual imagination, the region of "Cubitas" functions as metonymy of nation: "little Cuba," a region not yet obliterated by the onslaught of large sugar manufacture that riddled the western provinces—the main sugar-producing regions of Havana and Matanzas. Its pristine landscape signals a warning to the ravaging of island ecology by "Cuba grande" (big Cuba), "the Cuba of the slave compound" and mechanized sugar mills (Benítez Rojo, "Power/Sugar/Literature" 15–16) while, at the same time, mourning for a lost Eden on the verge of disappearance.

I examine the way the novel shapes a "spatial imagination" or an imagination of space that foregrounds "the experience of place" in Caribbean literature (DeLoughrey and Handley 4). Geographically distant from the colonial hub in Havana but pictured as the island's symbolic core, the source of its material and spiritual riches, the privileged space of Cubitas and its environs is mapped in the feminine. Lyrical evocations of two distinct tropical ecologies—garden and cave—and a recurrent natural phenomena, the tropical

tempest—help to produce a distinct sense of place. The accent on nature, so central to Romanticism, enables Gómez de Avellaneda to elucidate her own sense of dislocation, her ability to move between two worlds. Her Romantic ecology figures a detached and an engaged perspective, as if the novel was written with both a *criollo* and a peninsular audience in mind. At the same time, Gómez de Avellaneda's spatial imagination contributes to a broader transamerican sensibility, as seen in her poem "El viajero americano," a coded response to Heredia's "Oda al Niágara."

### **Picturing Cuba: The Spatial Imagination and the Sugar Plantation**

By its focus on the interior of the island and its bucolic descriptions of landscape, *Sab* manifests the "desire for the nation" permeating nineteenth-century Spanish American narrative. In Jorge Isaacs's *María* (1867), set in a similar idyllic landscape, the Valle del Cauca in Colombia, the bountiful scenery of the valley is associated with the dark beauty of its female protagonist, a technique also followed here in the equivalence between Carlota and insular landscape (quoted in Brickhouse 174). By continually voicing a preference for the pastoral, Carlota waxes nostalgia for a pre-conquest mode of life associated with the island's first inhabitants, the *taínos* (203). However, in contrast to Isaacs, Gómez de Avellaneda shifts gender and has Sab, a mulatto slave, appear within the lush landscape surrounding the Bellavista plantation. Although not as heavily accented as in Isaacs, the "feminization of land" becomes a primary trope for the representation of landscape, particularly in later passages, when Sab eulogizes his passion for Carlota in terms of sensing her presence in every element of nature (245). The *excess* of tropical nature conditions and ultimately determines the outcome of romantic passion, while linking in to a broader reflection on nation.

Gómez de Avellaneda articulates a vision of the natural world that is not merely the backdrop where the lovers play out their respective roles, but is rather woven into the texture of the novel as the *raison d'être* of romantic passion. It is the exuberance of their natural surroundings that propels Sab and Carlota's capacity for love, what makes them prototypical Romantic subjects and ultimately determines their tragic end (146). As she would do in her later poem, "El viajero americano," the author dons the mask of a traveler who is about to embark on a journey "por un país pintoresco y magnífico" ([1999] 148) ("a colorful and magnificent country" [*Sab*, Scott 59]) in company of her beloved: "La naturaleza se embellece con la presencia del objeto que se ama y éste se embellece con la naturaleza" (179–180) ("Nature becomes more beautiful in the presence

of the beloved and this person in turn is embellished by nature” [*Sab*, Scott 59]).

Hand-in-hand with an impersonal *viajero* (traveler) who surveys the land for the first time, the reader enters the space surrounding Puerto Príncipe through the lens of a fictional travelogue, stopping “[para] admirar más [. . .] los campos fertilísimos de aquel país privilegiado” (132) (to “admire the fuller savoring of the richly fertile earth of that privileged country” [*Sab*, Scott, 27])). Later identified as Enrique (132), the *viajero*’s interest in the landscape is primarily economic, to foster cultivation of the verdant, “fertile” plains. By emphasizing a newly “discovered” terrain, the narrator’s prospect view re-enacts Columbus’s legacy as well the inquisitive gaze of Enlightenment explorers, who detached themselves from the land in order to conquer it: Columbus, for the Spanish empire; Humboldt and later explorers, for the interests of science.

The spatial imagination traced of the “Cubitas” region falls within the picturesque iconography prevalent in nineteenth-century Spanish American narrative, as in Isaacs’s depiction of the valley of Cauca in *María*. Anticipating Cirilo Villaverde’s description of the Vuelta Abajo coffee plantation in *Cecilia Valdés*, Gómez de Avellaneda displays the Bellavista plantation as object of contemplation and idyllic landscape: “El sol terrible de la zona tórrida se acercaba a su ocaso [. . .] y sus últimos rayos [. . .] vestían de un colorido melancólico los campos vírgenes de aquella hermosa naturaleza [. . .].” (132) (“The brutal sun of the torrid zone was sinking into dusk [. . .] and its last rays [. . .] bathed the virgin fields of that youthful nature in melancholy hues” [Scott, *Sab* 27])). From the start, Gómez de Avellaneda views the tropics as a space tinged with melancholy, a sentiment meant to anticipate the effects of deforestation that were already noticeable in 1838–1840, the period in which the action takes place (editor’s notes, Cruz 321).

Enlightenment explorers had endowed the tropics with a peculiar aura, setting it apart from what they perceived was a “tamed” or domesticated nature in Europe (Stepan 15–17). It was the profusion of plants, the abundance and “hyperfertility” of plant life, and its perpetual verdure, that set the tropics apart as a region distinct from Europe (36). Here the reference to a “vigorosa y lozana vegetación” (Gómez de Avellaneda 132) (“vigorous and luxuriant vegetation” [*Sab*, Scott, 27])) echoes the way Enlightenment explorers perceived the impact of tropical vegetation; the most noticeable example is Humboldt, who, at first glance of the forests near Cumaná, had noted the sublimity associated with the tropical zone. An echo of the way that explorers from La Condamine to Humboldt describe the dense canopy of trees in the Amazon rain forest—a “*forêt vierge*” personified as a feminized though impenetrable space—surfaces subliminally here as “las copas frondosas de los árboles agostados por el calor del día” (132) (“the leafy crowns of the trees, parched by the day’s heat” [*Sab*, Scott, 27])). The accent on vegetation suggests the exoticizing of land from an “outside” or detached perspective, that signals

Gómez de Avellaneda's wish to engage a European reader unfamiliar with New World scenery.

To give us a first glimpse of "Cubitas," Gómez de Avellaneda draws on the archive of scientific travel writing, enumerating the varieties of tropical flora and fauna found in her native region. Birds and flowers are listed in a manner that recalls taxonomic categories used in European travel writing. Yet, true to a Romantic ecology, the author soon turns this detached view into an intimate encounter with nature.<sup>8</sup> The reader gleans the expatriate writer's desire for *pertenencia* or belonging to an insular community in her subsequent enumeration of birds and trees. She poetically evokes a list of "native" species familiar to a local subject: "El verde papagayo [. . .], el cao de un negro nítido [. . .], el carpintero real [. . .], la alegre guacamaya, el ligero tomeguín [. . .] y otra infinidad de aves indígenas, posaban en las ramas del tamarindo y del mango aromático" (132) ("The green parrot [. . .], the crow, distinctively black and lustrous, the royal woodpecker [. . .], the blithe macaw, the swift *tomeguín* [. . .] and a whole host of native birds alighted in the branches of tamarind and aromatic mango trees" [*Sab*, Scott, 27]). All of these birds are species native to Cuba; moreover, these living species are identified by their local, regional, and even indigenous names, rather than by the Latin [Linnean] nomenclature of European science. Hence the description privileges local knowledge over "universal" categories, emphasizing a deeply rooted sense of place. The use of American toponymy reinforces the narrator's authenticity, while, at the same time, the editorial notes identifying local species nod to a foreign reader who has never set foot on the tropics. For example, Mary Cruz explains that "la tornasolada mariposa" ("the iridescent butterfly" [*Sab*, Scott, 27]) is not a butterfly, as a peninsular reader would expect, but rather "a very small [red and green] bird, common in Cuba" (322).

Since the start of the narrative, the trope of travel unveils the imagination of space, in the sense that both reader and the unsuspecting traveler come to experience insular nature from both near and afar. How to reconcile these two perspectives? On the one hand, the spatial imagination in *Sab* is structured by a similar set of contradictions that build the characters' subjectivity; on the other, picturing insular landscape circumscribes a particular region, affirming regional identity, in contrast to the colonial and commercial center located in Havana.

Soon after the initial framing of landscape, appears Sab, a perfect blend between African and European races—he is, in Gómez de Avellaneda's memorable phrase, "un mulato perfecto" (133) ("a perfect mulatto" [*Sab*, Scott, 28]). In attempting to solve the "enigma" of his name, Mary Cruz conjectures that it refers to a banished tribe in the Congo; indeed, the author may have first heard the name from a Congo mother who used it to refer to her *mulato* offspring, branding, not unfavorably, the child's physique and color (Cruz 64–65). Contrary to critics' perplexity regarding the protagonist's "racial in-

definiteness” (Sommer 118), Sab’s status as miscegenated national subject is meant to illustrate the prototype of an emerging Cuban nationality. This is why Gómez de Avellaneda belabors the description of his physical appearance (exterior) as well as the inner drive that is to characterize his later actions.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Sab marks the “desire for racial integration” (Benítez, “Power/Sugar/Literature” 26) evident in Caribbean culture as a theater where indigenous, African, and European races play out their respective roles in a series of continuous migratory flows.

Sab functions as *mayoral* (overseer) in Don Carlos’s plantation, which introduces the economic underside of Romantic ecology: the sugar mill as site of production. In response to the *viajero* recently arrived at the scene, Enrique Otway, his rival for Carlota’s affection, Sab gives crucial facts regarding the size, extent, and purpose of the land: “Tiempo ha habido [. . .] en que este ingenio daba a su dueño doce mil arrobas de azúcar cada año, porque entonces más de cien negros trabajaban en sus cañaverales” (135) (“there has been times [. . .] when this plantation produced for its owner some three hundred thousand pounds of sugar every year, because then over more than a hundred blacks worked in the cane fields” [*Sab*, Scott 29]). A landscape of apparent prosperity soon gives way to imminent decline: “pero los tiempos han variado y el propietario actual de Bellavista no tiene en él sino cincuenta negros, ni excede su zafra de seis mil panes de azúcar” (135) (“But times have changed, and since the present owner of Bellavista has only fifty blacks, his production does not exceed six thousand loaves of sugar” [*Sab*, Scott 29]). From this description, we learn that Don Carlos owns the prototype of *ingenio* common in Cuba between the late eighteenth-century and 1815, a year that marked the rapid turn toward industrialization propelling the unprecedented growth of sugar manufacture at mid-nineteenth-century (Funes Monzote 43–44). Indeed, the Bellavista fits the characteristics of this earlier phase of sugar production almost exactly, given its relatively small size, reduced though enslaved labor force, and average yield of roughly ten thousand *arrobas*.

Sab’s testimony proves, however, that the size of the *ingenio* (sugar factory) does not affect the slaves, who are subject to constant exploitation: “Es una vida terrible a la verdad [. . .]. Bajo este cielo de fuego el esclavo casi desnudo trabaja toda la mañana sin descanso” (135) (“It is truly a terrible life. [. . .] Under this fiery sky the nearly naked slave works all morning without a rest” [Scott, *Sab* 29]), enjoying only a small pause over the noon hour. The three phases of sugar production are synthesized here: the cutting of sugar cane in the fields, the grinding of the stalks in *trapiches* or oxen-powered grinders to extract the juice, then the hot boilers where the *melaza* or fermented cane juice evaporates into crystal. In a few brief lines, Sab conveys not only the intense manual labor required in producing sugar, but also its detrimental effects on the slaves, noting the fact that they were only allowed

two hours of sleep, what necessarily altered the sequence of day and night (135). By means of metaphor—the “fuego del sol” (136) (fiery rays of sun) burning the backs of sugar-cane cutters turns into the “fuego de leña” (136) (“the heat of firewood” [Scott 29]) inside the sugar mill—field and factory are linked in the process of sugar production. We *see* the cauldron that caused the cane-juice to boil, and how the slaves had to patiently toil, stirring the liquid long hours and under exceedingly hot temperatures. Seen in terms of an environmental history of Cuba, this eloquent passage illustrates the reliance on wood as fuel for the sugar industry (Funes Monzote 50, 55). Historian Funes Monzote asserts in *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba* that “wood [was] an important element in building of *ingenios*,” as everything—from buildings to *trapiches*—was made out of wood (49–50).<sup>10</sup>

This graphic image of the interior of the sugar mill leads to an abstract statement regarding slave labor: “es un cruel espectáculo la vista de la humanidad degradada, de hombres convertidos en brutos, que llevan en su frente la marca de la esclavitud y en su alma la desesperación del infierno” (136) (“The sight of this degraded humanity, where men become mere brutes, is a cruel spectacle. These are men whose brows are seared with the mark of slavery just as their souls are branded with the desperation of Hell” [*Sab*, Scott, 29–30]). *Sab*’s lament for insular nature is aligned with a broader “yearning for lost landscapes” in Caribbean literature, a response to the large-scale deforestation that resulted from the expansion of the sugar industry, beginning with the “Great Clearing” during the mid-seventeenth century that turned the British and French Caribbean into “sugar islands,” and culminating two centuries later in the technological innovations that depleted wooded areas in the Hispanic Caribbean (Paravisini Gebert 99–116). Although, historically, the landscape surrounding Puerto Príncipe had not yet been totally absorbed by plantation economy (131), Gómez de Avellaneda prefigures its later demise. Central to Gómez de Avellaneda’s Romantic ecology is a striking contrast between the natural world and the social order, what serves as a powerful disclaimer of the institution of slavery and a warning of what is to come.

Bellavista was, then, one of many small sugar mills prevalent in Cuba before the “boom” in the industry which occurred after 1830, a consequence of the 1791 revolution in Haiti and the collapse of the plantation system in the French island (Funes Monzote, *From Rainforest to Canefield* 83; Moreno Friginals 22–23, 27). Led by its intellectual author, Francisco Arango y Parreño, the Havana oligarchy soon “won the backing of colonial authorities,” creating a united front in order “to modernize the colony and develop it economically,” envisioning post-Enlightenment progress and prosperity under the code-name “la felicidad” (Funes Monzote 84) (progress and prosperity). But, “la felicidad” was not shared by all members of the Creole aristocracy. Like many other small landowners, Gómez de Avellaneda’s fictional Don



Carlos had not prospered under the 1830's sugar boom. On the contrary, he had suffered a significant loss of land; a loss due, as Sab hints in his initial exchange with Enrique, due to mounting economic pressures occasioned by the rapid expansion of sugar (136).

Don Carlos's Bellavista plantation is situated in the heart of "Cuba pequeña" (Little Cuba) (Benítez Rojo, "Power/Sugar/Literature" 15), based on small farms, diversified crops, and run by free workers (Funes Monzote 86), an agricultural system more attuned with "nature's economy."<sup>11</sup> Sab's ambivalent status as a slave, but one who enjoyed special privilege and protection, is explained, in part, by the fact that Don Carlos's plantation functioned according to an earlier mode of production (159). By the 1830s sugar boom, pasture lands and smaller landholdings were already on the verge of decline, swept away by "Cuba grande" (Big Cuba) based on a single crop and requiring "[large], slaveholding plantations" (Funes Monzote 86). In fact, since the 1830s, the sugar industry was rapidly expanding south, around Matanzas and Trinidad, and invading the "red, fertile soil" of Artemisa Plain, and east to Güines, an area of "'healthy, fertile, and lovely" plains, surrounded by a river and dotted with small farms—the epitome of "Cuba pequeña" (Funes Monzote 84, 87–88; Moreno Friginals 22).

Equidistant from "Cubitas" and the city of Puerto Príncipe (131), and bathed by the waters of the Tíñima, the Bellavista plantation lies next to the fertile "tierras rojas" coveted by the big sugar plantations (131). Bellavista is thus under the threat of "Cuba grande," which required an ever wider extension of land, the clearing away of large tracts of forest for planting sugar cane, and an ever constant supply of slaves. This explains why the landscape is tainted by "melancholy," which colors the *organization* of landscape, its absorption into a social order. By praising the natural beauty of the island in these opening scenes, Gómez de Avellaneda voices the "yearning for lost landscapes" (Paravisini Gebert 99), an aesthetic response to deforestation prevalent in Caribbean fiction.

Enlightenment explorer Alexander von Humboldt had already noted the effect which the European "lust for the land" had in American territories; in Cuba particularly, he had "warned about the lack of subsistence crops that characterized many of the tropical regions owing to 'the imprudent activity of Europeans, which has turned the order of nature on its head'" (qtd. in Funes Monzote 86). Humboldt's prophetic statement explains Gómez de Avellaneda's scathing critique of the British as embodied in the Otways. For it was the British who had first introduced the *máquina de vapor* (steam engine) into the sugar mill, facilitating the transition from "primitive" *ingenios* like the Bellavista, pulled by oxen, to the semi-mechanized sugar mill, run entirely by machines (the steam engine) (Funes Monzote 129; Moreno Friginals 32–33, 102). In an intermediate stage in sugar production, the semi-mechanized sugar

mill would soon turn into the big *factoría*, associated with the rise of “Cuba grande,” a technological shift that prompted the expansion of the industry into the heartland of Cuba, to the east, “the plains of the Central District,” mainly, in Cienfuegos, Santa Clara, and Sancti Spiritus (Funes Monzote 129, 131).<sup>12</sup> Don Carlos’s loss of fortune is, in part, due to this expansion of the big *factoría* in the eastern region, whose ravaging effect on the ecology of the island is denounced in Gómez de Avellaneda’s novel (Benítez Rojo, “Power/Sugar/Literature” 35). Sab comes to embody the values of a traditional creole culture associated with “Little Cuba,” more so than the “soft-hearted,” and somewhat weak, creole land owner, Don Carlos. In her prologue, Gómez de Avellaneda declares that she let the novel sit for over three years (127); assuming, as her biographers do, that she wrote it between 1836 and 1838; that is, in transit between Bordeaux and Seville (Servera 46), the author would have been aware of the impending “savannization” of her native region due to the impact of large-scale sugar manufacture, which would increase over the 1840s and 1860s (Funes Monzote 131; Moreno Friginals 65–70). The novel appeared in Madrid in 1841, as if to alert, if not prevent, the region’s ecological demise.

By the 1860s, when Justo Germán Cantero had published *Los Ingenios de Cuba*, sugar giants had transformed the topography of the island, as towers and smoke stacks loomed over previously wooded territory. Intended as a showcase and aesthetic justification for large-scale sugar production, the beautiful illustrations in Cantero’s series conceal the steam-engine’s negative effect on the ecology (Cantero, “Ingenio la Amistad”). “Steam’s impact on the environment [. . .] was characterized first by an increased need for fuel and later by an expansion of the surface area of the cane fields” (Funes Monzote 129). Near the island’s geographic center, steam-powered *ingenios* (sugar factories) were less common than in the heavily industrialized western region, but the average size of the *ingenios* remained the same.<sup>13</sup>

The apex of sugar production in Cuba came with the introduction of boiler houses or *trenes al vacío* (Jamaican sugar kettle batteries), which ushered the rise of the big *factoría* or “mechanized sugar mill” (Funes Monzote). Of the twenty-five illustrations included in *Los ingenios*, half were mechanized “with an average area of 86 *caballerías*” (Funes Monzote 131), a noticeable difference from both the steam-run plantations and the earlier, Bellavista-type *ingenios* (Cantero, “Interior of Boiler House, Ingenio Santa Susana”). In fact, “this new type of sugar mill reconfigured the technical and spatial organization of the industry compared with its traditional forms during the early nineteenth century” (Funes Monzote 131). Cantero’s illustrations of the sugar-mill, featuring “the three main buildings of the *ingenio*—the *casa de molienda* (pressing house), *casa de calderas* (boiler house), and *casa de purga* (purging house), where the sugar was separated from the molasses”—hide the fact that all “were constructed from lumber” (Funes Monzote 49). The

open fields in seeming harmony with the buildings of the *batey*, along with the church tower, whose bell marked the rhythm of work for the slaves, gloss over the hard truth that “deforestation occurred in every region of the island” (Funes Monzote 131; Cantero, “Ingenio Manaca”).

Alarmed that the same was about to occur in her beloved Puerto Príncipe, Gómez de Avellaneda focuses her resistance to sugar on the Otways, who represent foreigners’ ability to profit from an immensely fertile land, what is facilitated by the locals’ more relaxed attitude to matters of “agriculture, commerce, and industry” (149).<sup>14</sup> Gómez de Avellaneda’s caricature of the eldest Otway may have deeper historical roots: his obscure origins in piracy may allude to British pirate attacks in late seventeenth-century Caribbean; concretely, to Henry Morgan’s raid of Puerto Príncipe in 1668, when he pillaged the villa in return for ransom money (Marrero 137–140).<sup>15</sup> Jorge Otway had succeeded in commerce to such an extent that his dearest ambition was to become, like the most opulent of *criollos* (creoles), a slave owner himself (150). This was tantamount to a foreign “invasion” of the city’s *criollo*-controlled economy; hence, a threat to the city’s Mediterranean traditions and values (Moreno Friginals 69; Levi Marrero 60). To make inroads in a society that would have ordinarily been off limits, the elder Otway plots to have Enrique marry the daughter of the richest creole aristocrat, a hope dashed by Don Carlos’s sudden loss of fortune (153–155).<sup>16</sup> In short, the author’s scathing critique of the Otways is due to their association with foreign interests, the same that fueled the rise of “Cuba grande” (big Cuba), associated with global markets, authoritarian power, and the loss of the island’s lush forests (Benítez Rojo 35; “Power/Sugar/Literature” 15). Read as allegory, Carlota’s doomed marriage to Otway warns against a mercantilist hold on the nation.

The novel stages the contrast between “Little Cuba” and “Big Cuba” in terms of a romantic rivalry between “creole” and foreigner: Enrique Otway and the prototypical Sab. Eager to rush back to Puerto Príncipe to attend to his father’s business, Enrique is not persuaded by the family’s pleas to wait until after an impending storm passes (162). Instructed by Don Carlos to accompany Enrique, Sab wavers whether to let Enrique perish or save his life, as the storm had, predictably, caused Enrique to be thrown off his horse by a thunderbolt (167). In a scene bathed in “pathetic fallacy where nature is subordinated to the [character’s] self” (Bate 77), Sab decides to rescue Enrique, but only because Carlota had entrusted him with his safety (167–169). The tempest stages Gómez de Avellaneda’s romantic ecology, pitting two opposing attitudes toward the natural world as an effective strategy for characterization: the younger Otway is depicted as an “inferior” soul given his reckless behavior, disregard for local knowledge, and crass material values; in contrast, Sab and Carlota, respectively, are each endowed with “superior” sensibilities (164; 168); despite the abyss of race, they are “loftier souls [. . .]

rich in sentiment" (*Sab*, Scott, 48). Romantic ecology here underscores anti-slavery sentiment, for, once the men arrive back at the plantation, Carlota grants Sab his freedom (171).

### Sab's Garden and the Tropes of Romantic Ecology

Soon after the tempest scene, and reassured that her beloved is safe, Carlota finds refuge in the garden (173). The garden trope recurs in European Romanticism to signify the harmony between the natural and social worlds, a domesticated nature that has been carefully tended to bring out salient features of the landscape, "beautifying" it as a visually pleasing, and sensually delightful, site. Gómez de Avellaneda pictures the garden within a larger frame: "todo el país [era] un vasto y magnífico vergel" (174) ("the entire country was a vast and magnificent garden" [*Sab*, Scott, 56])—what not only reinforces the Edenic trope configuring the tropics, but turns the garden into a metonymy of nation. Moreover, the narrator stresses the difference between the tropical garden and the continental tradition, for Sab's garden, grown out of sentiment, does not conform to French or English styles of "enclosed" or artificially landscaped gardens (174). While acknowledging the patterns of taste and sensibility which led to the rise of the institution of gardening in Europe—particularly in the two countries associated with the Romantic movement, England and France—Gómez de Avellaneda nods, once again, to a European public, who had to be accommodated (acclimatized) to the virtues of Sab's secluded spot in the tropics. Like the garden in which Efraín and María exchange amorous looks in Isaacs's *María* (Operé 169), the garden Sab has carefully tended for his beloved is a bucolic space set apart from the plantation's sphere of influence. Framed by "triples hileras de altas cañas" (174) ("a triple row of tall reeds" [*Sab*, Scott, 56])—a "wilder" yet related species of cane to the one used in cultivation<sup>17</sup>—the sugar plantation looms sufficiently near so to disrupt the idyll contained within its borders.

Sab's garden displays a dazzling array of tropical flowers. Much like Silvestre de Balboa's epic poem *Espejo de paciencia* (1604), famous for its lyrical cornucopia of flowers and fruits, the flowers blooming in Sab's garden reveal "the desire for insular nature" that anticipates the "desire for the nation" in nineteenth-century Latin America (Benítez Rojo, "Power/Sugar/Literature" 26–27).<sup>18</sup> Paralleling the opening scene describing the Bellavista plantation, the garden's flora and fauna abound with native species: the emerald *colibrí*, the "clavellina," "malva rosa," and *pasionaria* flowers are identified in the author's notes (175), following her earlier tactic of privileging local knowledge over Linnean taxonomy. Sab's garden, and the broader metonymy of

nation implied in “un vasto y magnífico vergel” (174) (a vast and magnificent garden), figures “Cuba pequeña” (little Cuba), located in the interior of the island, dotted by small sugar plantations such as Don Carlos’s Bellavista.

### The Caves or an Archeology of Space

Gómez de Avellaneda’s Romantic ecology shapes an imagination of space according to specific topographic features and natural phenomena. The last in the series is the family’s trip to “Cubitas,” a zone known for its spectacular cave formations. En route to “Cubitas,” the landscape shifts from the evergreen foliage that endows the tropics’ paradisiacal aura, to a more “somber” hue. The underside of a Caribbean “spatial imaginary,” the caves uncover layers of buried history, from pictographs drawn by unknown *taíno* hands, to a hidden chamber that provided refuge to runaway slaves (207–209). As they approach the caves, the group is greeted by a light that intermittently shines across their path (199), suggesting a region immune to the expansion of sugar. Martina, an indigenous wise-woman who lives alone in the midst of this “wilderness,” and who is allegedly the last descendant of the *cacique* Camagüey, greets the group and entertains them with her story-telling. As if to counter the erasure of indigenous peoples from the map of the nation, Gómez de Avellaneda voices through Martina a corrective view of Cuba’s colonial history. Substituting oral memory for written record, Sab retells the legend that Martina had often transmitted to him. At the first colonial encounter, Camagüey had greeted the foreign invaders with gestures of good will; his kindness cruelly repaid when the Spaniards exacted the ultimate vengeance by throwing Camagüey over a cliff; the soil still reddened by his blood and sacrifice. The light that mysteriously appears across the night sky is the *cacique*’s tormented soul who comes to haunt his oppressors as a last act of defiance. Sab ends his soliloquy with a prophetic vision in which the blacks promise to carry out the vengeance exacted by their indigenous forebears (202).<sup>19</sup> One of the few instances in which Sab hints at open rebellion, this passage effectively links the disappearance of Cuba’s indigenous population with the ecological devastation brought by a plantation economy. That explains why Don Carlos’s party does not dare step into the eleventh and deepest chamber of the cave—a refuge for runaway slaves, the rock was also steeped in blood (208–09).

At the conclusion of the “Cubitas” scene, the family sits down to a banquet where master and slave, man and woman, white and black, English and creole, enjoy a communal feast in celebration of *convivencia* or mutually shared bonds of sociability. For a brief epiphany, racial tensions are suspended (219), upholding a “utopian project of co-existence to compensate for a frag-

mented, unstable, and conflictive Antillean identity” (Benítez Rojo, *La isla que se repite* 28). As we have seen, the bucolic landscape of “Cubitas”—“Cuba pequeña” (little Cuba)—is the depository of autochthonous values; the site of an authentic creole culture peopled by descendants of the original *tainos* (Martina), Spanish immigrants, and Africans, a pastoral site where these diverse communities evolve with a strong sense of *pertenencia* or rootedness in place (Benítez Rojo, “Power/Sugar/Literature” 15). The banquet scene anticipates the transition to a broader sense of *civitas* or a communal way of life, an echo of Silvestre de Balboa’s exultation of Bayamo in *Espejo de paciencia*.

The same utopian impulse surfaces toward the end of the novel, when a broken-hearted Sab returns to Martina, on the eve of Carlota and Otway’s marriage and before his own imminent end (281–286). In parallel fashion, Carlota returns to Bellavista after her marriage, for nature offers her respite and consolation from the disillusionment of finding herself tied to a man who is ruled only by material values (302–304). In a poignant last scene, Carlota mourns for Sab after Teresa reveals to her the contents of his letter, what prompts her to return to the cherished landscape of “Cubitas” (306–307, 318). Whereas before the mysterious light appearing in this region had been associated with the *cacique* ancestor, now, local superstition attributes it to Martina’s ghost; however, the shadowy figure is soon identified as Carlota, who has come to pay homage to Sab in his final resting place. The Gothic atmosphere suggests that, although their union was impossible given existing class and racial barriers, the lovers are united in the mythical time/space of a (future) imagined nation: “¿Habr  podido olvidar la hija de los tr picos, al esclavo que descansa en una humilde sepultura bajo aquel hermoso cielo?” (320) (“will the daughter of the tropics have been able to forget the slave who rests in a simple grave under that magnificent sky?” [*Sab*, Scott, 147]).

Sab’s farewell letter brings together all the elements of G mez de Avellaneda’s Romantic ecology to provide an edifying, albeit contradictory, “moral of landscape” (Bate 62). Sab seeks in nature—the azure sky of the tropics, the night sky, the blustering winds of the hurricane—an answer to his question regarding the basic inequity of his condition. While nature guarantees the equality among all humans, it is social injustice that condemns the slave to an abject state, hence upsetting the inherent harmony of nature. Without a place in the social order, the slave is condemned to *pariah* status, denied a claim to citizenship or land (309–311). Sab’s rhetoric denounces the fundamental cause of the slavery system: a radical split between nature and culture, a severing of the bonds between the natural and social worlds. Only a pervasive belief in the unity of nature can save him, for that is what had fanned his all-consuming passion (312–313).

## Picturing Cuba in a Trans-American Frame

Striking her own note as a transnational writer, Gómez de Avellaneda's picturing Cuba as a natural space is both a pastoral hymn to her island from her vantage point in the peninsula (nostalgia) as well as a dirge before the failure of modernity to sustain a viable project of nation-building. By her poetic rendition of garden, field, and cave, Gómez de Avellaneda affirms "Cuba pequeña" (little Cuba), articulating her own discourse of resistance to sugar, one aligned with the Del Monte circle's program of reform but countering their allegiance with British abolitionists (Luis 1–4; Benítez Rojo "Power/Sugar/Literature" 26–28, 35).

In many ways, Gómez de Avellaneda's treatment of nature echoes José María Heredia's "Himno del desterrado," which depicts Cuba as a binary between paradise and hell:

¡Dulce Cuba! En tu seno se miran  
 En su grado más alto y profundo  
 La bellezas del físico mundo,  
 Los horrores del mundo moral. (Heredia 75)

(Cuba! In thy bosom are coupled  
 of the physical world, its beauty  
 of the moral world  
 its horror.)

At a later stage in her life, returning to Spain via New York, Gómez de Avellaneda's "A vista del Niágara" (*Antología poética* 234–239) responds to one of Heredia's most famous poems, "Oda al Niágara," a celebration of the American sublime (Heredia 221–229). In contrast to Heredia, her poetic voice falls silent before the imposing waterfalls, since both her widowed state and her precursor's verses have muted what would otherwise have been a song of admiration and praise (*Antología poética* 235). Unlike Heredia, whose ode ends on a Romantic longing for love, Gómez de Avellaneda turns her gaze, not to sentiment, but to an object fashioned by human industry: the bridge uniting two sides of the same continent (*Antología poética* 238), thus affirming a hemispheric view of the Americas.<sup>20</sup> A similar transamerican perspective surfaces in "El viajero americano" (The American Traveler), a poem where a traveler views from above the high *sierras* surrounding the valley of Mexico and its imposing landscape of snow-capped volcanoes.<sup>21</sup> The prospect view soon gives way to a vision of "un nuevo paraíso" (a new paradise) composed of gardens, forests, waterfalls, and caverns, a composite image of American

landscapes which ends abruptly when the traveler arrives at the desert. There the vision turns into a mirage, for the traveler has now reached an inward vision—an inscape—of the diverse ecologies conjoined in the Americas (*Antología poética* 157–158). As “viajera solitaria” (a solitary traveler), *la peregrina* bridging two worlds, Spain and Cuba, Europe and the New World, Gómez de Avellaneda shares her own inner vision so that we, too, can reimagine our own space and place.

## Notes

1. Albin also quotes Sarduy in her reading of “Al partir.” The predominance of sound leads her to assess the poem’s lyrical “I” as nomadic subject (111–112).
2. Carlos Raggi affirms that “Al partir” shows Byron’s influence, as the Cuban author’s *Memorias*, recalls Byron’s “The Corsair,” which accents the allure of sea voyage and the freedom of maritime travel (38–39).
3. Luis privileges the writers associated with the Del Monte circle who resided in Cuba as the originators of “early anti-slavery works” (4–5).
4. See Picón Garfield, Araújo (1997), and Guerra’s lucid readings.
5. All references to *Sab*, unless otherwise noted, are from the 1973 edition by Mary Cruz.
6. A contrast established in chapter 2 ([1973] 144–145).
7. In her edition, Mary Cruz notes: “Escenario romántico, la naturaleza cubana, despojada de su realidad por la fantasía de la autora, que le confiere otra realidad poetizada, puebla el mundo novelesco de *Sab* de elementos nunca vistos en la literatura de ficción” ([1973] 91). (A romantic setting, the Cuban environment, stripped of its reality by the author’s fantasy, who projects onto it another, poeticized reality, dominates the novelistic world of *Sab*, composed of elements never before seen in literary fiction).
8. I agree with Bate’s reappraisal of Wordsworth as a “Poet of Nature,” and his assessment of Romanticism as a movement prefiguring contemporary concerns about nature and the environment (9). Both science and art, the term “ecology” was coined in 1866 by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel “who defined it as ‘the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature’ [ . . . ] the relationship between living beings and their environment” (Bate 36). It is in that sense that I read Gómez de Avellaneda’s fiction and poetry.
9. Mary Cruz also notes that the term “labriego” to describe Sab is not usual in Cuba (323), another sign of the author’s acknowledgement of a peninsular reader.
10. He continues: “It was more ‘economical’ to clear forests and put cane fields in their place, using the wood to rebuild the mill quickly. Finally, there was the imperious



need to keep a reserve of woodland to feed the fires under the boilers during the harvest” (49–50).

11. “Although *ingenios* existed in other areas, their smaller numbers and less powerful technologies made their impact on the environment relatively less” (Funes Monzote 129).
12. “The center of slave plantation system moved from the Havana area to east, occupying natural regions in the cane had not yet been grown” (Funes Monzote 129).
13. Although the figures are a bit contradictory, Funes Monzote indicates 44.6 *caballerías* en Puerto Príncipe, Nuevitas, and Oriente, compared to 43.3 in Havana-Matanzas (129–130).
14. “Sabido es que las riquezas de Cuba atraen en todo tiempo innumerables extranjeros, que con mediana industria y actividad no tardan en enriquecerse de una manera asombrosa para los indolentes isleños que [ . . . ] se adormecen, [ . . . ] y abandonan a la codicia y actividad de los europeos todos los ramos de la agricultura comercio, e industria” ([1973] 149) (“It is well known that Cuba’s riches continually attract innumerable foreigners who, with middling effort and activity, soon become prosperous, in a way that astonishes the indolent islanders; these [ . . . ] become somnolescent [ . . . ] surrendering their agriculture, commerce, and industry to the greed and enterprise of the Europeans” [*Sab*, Scott, 38]).
15. The eldest Otway is described as a “buhonero,” associated with piracy or contraband trade; he is not, strictly speaking a “peddler in the United States,” as rendered in Nina M. Scott’s translation (38); on this hinges Brickhouse’s reading of the novel, which has Enrique “born in all likelihood in the United States” given “his father’s former peddling years” (174). However, the eldest Otway is associated, not with North America, but with two Catalan merchants with whom he set up shop. That confirms the Otways’ British lineage, bolstered by the fact that Enrique is sent to London to study, much like Isaacs’s Efraín (149–150). The link between peninsular and British mercantile interests could not be more clear.
16. Don Carlos’s family objected to the match due to Jorge Otway’s suspicious origins and *nouveau riche* status; when, at Carlota’s insistence, he agreed to have her marry Enrique, the family dispossessed him. To add to his misfortune, a legal suit had also deprived him of his late wife’s inheritance. Likewise, the elder Otway saw the marriage as a way to recuperate from financial set-back (1973] 153–155).
17. The garden is not merely “an ideal space for intimacy and daydreaming,” as Sommer claims, concluding, somewhat hastily, that “he, [ . . . ] as much as Carlota, needed a spot for recreation” (119–120). It is both Sab’s gift to his beloved and a sign of his love, as well as a metonymy of nation, as I argue here. Cruz explains that the type of cane alluded to here is the “caña brava” or “caña bambú” (328); the cane used in sugar manufacture was the *Otahiti* strain.
18. Silvestre de Balboa was a poet from the Canary Islands who served as “escribano” in the zone of Puerto Príncipe; *Espejo de paciencia* registers the degree of integration and prosperity achieved by an emerging *criollo* society in Bayamo (Benítez Rojo, *La isla que se repite* 25–26). The poem was discovered by José Antonio Echeverría, one

of the members of the Del Monte circle, who turned it into the cornerstone of Cuban literature (González Echevarría 105–109). For a new reading of *Espejo de paciencia*, see Marrero-Fente *Epic, Empire and Community in the Atlantic World: Silvestre de Balboa's Espejo de paciencia*.

19. “La tierra que fue regada con la sangre una vez lo será aún otra: los descendientes de los opresores serán oprimidos, y los hombres negros serán los terribles vengadores de los hombres cobrizos” (168) (“The earth which was once drenched in blood will be so again: the descendants of the oppressors will be themselves oppressed, and the black men will be the terrible avengers of those of copper color” [*Sab*, Scott, 73]).
20. For further discussion of the connections between Heredia and Gómez de Avellaneda's Niágara poems, see Albin (134–142, 146–161).
21. For further discussion of “El viajero americano,” see Albin (242–258).

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