Stranger in a Strange Land: The Discourse of Alienation in Gómez de Avellaneda's Abolitionist Novel Sab

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Stranger in a Strange Land: The Discourse of Alienation in Gómez de Avellaneda's Abolitionist Novel *Sab*

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's novel *Sab* presents the modern critic with few problems of literary classification. Published in 1841, when opposition to slavery influenced writers in both Europe and America, the novel is clearly and irrevocably abolitionist. Equally clearly, *Sab* employs many romantic conventions: sentimentiality, the tragic hero, the exaltation of freedom, the use of nature to reflect human emotion, the portrayal of the idealized female character as icon, nocturnal scenery, an impassioned tone, and supernatural and exotic imagery. Indeed, even the careful reader might view *Sab* as a mediocre artifact of stereotypical romanticism. But such categorizations constitute only the beginning of a response to the novel. For instance, Avellaneda's emphasis on women's lack of freedom makes the work unique among contemporary Cuban abolitionist novels (Schulman 363). Her abolitionism is in fact no mere sentimental theme, but one element in a complex vision that links all of the characters and the narrator. The narrative equates and then integrates all forms of slavery, physical and mental, thus analyzing the condition of all those marginalized into assuming a colonized status. Like its abolitionism, the romanticism is no mere reflection of convention. The romantic characteristics are counterbalanced by narrative shifts and certain dissonances in the treatment of nature: the narrative voice is alienated from the romantic conventions which it uses. A discourse of the "other," arising from Avellaneda's own alienation as a literary woman in a misogynist society1 and as a colonial in the "mother country," pervades both the characterization and the descriptions of *Sab*.

Interactions among the characters may be read as a coherent presentation of several distinct social discourses,2 each designed to emphasize the essential alienation of one class, race, or sex from another. The signs characteristic of women's discourse, for example, encase them in an indirect mode of behavior which exiles them from the language of power. This restriction is evident in Teresa's and Carlota's speech. A similar process occurs in Sab's characterization as a representative—albeit highly stylized—of Cuba's slaves.3

Another aspect of the characterization criticizes race and sex privilege, and at the same time establishes connections between the two; a split between body and mind is one important unifying motif. That is, each representative of a class exiled from the discourse of power is marginalized in the first place because of her/his body. These characters represent at the same time a degrading socioeconomic status and superiority of spirit, resulting in a paradoxical division between body and soul in each of them.

The characterization of Carlota portrays her as the typical romantic heroine, but she is also seen as a victim of her own temperament and the norms of her class. The object of almost universal adoration, she is unable to use her emotions properly. Carlota is a tragic heroine of romanticism in two major ways. Although she demonstrates a proclivity to sweeping love, which by definition makes her a superior being in *Sab*'s ideological framework, it brings her misfortune because she chooses an inappropriate object. Sab's generous gift, which enables her to marry Enrique, thus paradoxically spells her doom. Carlota's is a prosaic, open-ended fate, inconsistent (within the novel's terms) with her true nature. Teresa prophesies her future
unhappiness:

No he conocido otra cosa sino que serás desgraciada, no obstante tu hermosura y tus gracios, no obstante el amor de tu esposo y de cuantos te conocen. Serás desgraciada si no moderas esa sensibilidad pronta siempre a alarmarse (213).

Since female education then emphasized that sensibility should reign rather than reason, Carlota's extreme sensitivity is characteristic of the romantic heroine and nineteenth-century female typology, and thereby suggests what land-owning women's status and possible modes of behavior were at that time.

Her sensibility is not the only reason for Carlota's empty life. The novel suggests another—societally constructed and enforced—possibility. Unable to adjust to the commercial world her husband inhabits, exiled from Cuba in Europe, as well as from her true feelings, Carlota lives out her life unhappily. Her fate constitutes Avellaneda's strongest criticism of marriage in the novel. Divorce is impossible, since marriage is a "lazo indisoluble." Carlota remains chained (to use Avellaneda's language) to her master Enrique, even lacking power to dispose of her money as she wishes. The image of Carlotta as slave—unable to determine her own destiny—dominates the latter part of the novel.

Carlota's transformation from a flighty, capricious young girl into a mature woman is accomplished by a narrative shift from the moment she begins to realize Enrique's unworthiness. Her chronic illnesses express this internal realization and the resultant delayed maturation, thus permitting her to withdraw periodically from Enrique's world and return to Cubitas. In her case, therefore, the body/mind split is exemplified in physical infirmity, a typically indirect and common means of exerting control over one's destiny for upper-class nineteenth-century women, whose options were few. Trapped in the greedy, materialistic world of business, her passage into disillusioned womanhood also parallels the nineteenth-century narrative's movement from romanticism to realism (Harter 135).

Other aspects of Carlota's characterization prevent the careful reader from assuming that she is a completely stereotypical character. Her portrayal best exemplifies what one critic has described as a characteristic of all of Gómez de Avellaneda's novels: "social norm prevents private happiness, and the ideal and the real are in constant conflict" (Harter 121).

Both in her fantasy of an ideal world and in her strong negative reaction to injustice in the past, she subverts the patriarchal discourse of power spoken by her fiancé Enrique, her father, and even historians of the Spanish conquest of America. When a young girl, Carlota expresses a vision reminiscent of Rousseau of the Indians living happily and innocently, in harmony with nature, before the Conquest. She follows her vision with a utopian wish addressed to Enrique:

... ¡loro 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, de libertad (187-88).

Despite the overlay of romantic ideology and Carlota's apparent naiveté, she recognizes the advantages of an outsider's position. Avellaneda makes her similarity to Sab explicit by following this exchange with an interior monologue in which the slave suggests that he and she might have been happy in Africa as well.

Carlota's idyllic dream of a simple life in harmony with nature is a direct consequence of her rejection of war and subjugation. Unlike her creator not a writer, but like her a reader, she transmits the author's anti-Spanish, anti-slavery sentiments when, in a thoroughly emotional outburst, she says of the Spanish conquest of America:

¡Jamás he podido . . . leer tranquilamente la historia sangrienta de la conquista de América! ¡Dios mío, cuántos horrores! Pareceme empero increíble que puedan los hombres llegar a tales extremos de barbarie (187).

And again, when she sees her father's slaves on their way to work, she says:

¡Pobres infelices! . . . Se juzgan afortunados, porque no se les prodigan palos e injurias, y comen tranquilamente el pan de la esclavitud. Se juzgan afortunados y son esclavos sus hijos antes de salir del vientre de sus madres, y los ven vender luego como a bestias irracionales . . . ¡A sus lujos, carne y sangre suya! (185)

An anti-slavery, anti-Spanish attitude is typical of the romantic canon in America. Although Avellaneda lived in Spain for most of her life, she remained a colonial. Also, she repeatedly expressed nostalgia for Cuba. The passages quoted here thereby acquire special significance when we remember the author's Cuban birth. Throughout the novel, descriptions of slavery conditions in Cuba during this period are historically accurate (Jackson 89), and support the abolitionist ideology, about fifty years before slavery was finally and totally prohibited in Cuba. Ultimately, however, Carlota's
condemnation of slavery also poignantly emphasizes her own lack of freedom. Her alienated position has another distinguishing characteristic. An outsider like the black slaves she pitied, she, like them, is thereby able to observe history, and perceive its distortions. Unlike the slaves in this novel (except Sab), however, Carlota achieves a measure of authenticity beyond her stereotypical qualities.

In Sab, “the amo-slave antithesis yields a formula, for its time daring: the slave’s soul (Sab’s) is noble, altruistic and liberated; the patrician’s (Enrique Otway’s) is enslaved and mercantile” (Schulman 363). When Sab reveals to Teresa that he has been spying on his rival since they met, he says: “Desde la primera vez que examiné a ese extranjero, conocí que el alma que se encerraba en tan hermoso cuerpo era huésped mezquino de un soberbio alogamiento” (228). This sentence is suggestive in several different ways. It expresses most clearly the implicit contrast between the two men’s fates, dependent upon class and race, but metaphorically stated as soul/guest housed in body/lodging. Enrique’s soul is a stranger — “extranjero” — to his noble-looking body; that is, he has none. This image suggests an orthodox Catholic view of Protestantism; his English descent is therefore also a metaphor for his amorality, his spiritual emptiness. Sab, on the other hand, can only reveal his soul’s nobility in his communications with Teresa, and in his death.

In another passage, Sab says: “Es . . . que a veces es noble y libre el alma, aunque el cuerpo sea esclavo y villano.” The tragic dimension of Sab’s mind/body split climaxes when his soul finally destroys his body; he dies heartbroken, as women stereotypically do, allowing his emotions to take over. Enrique Otway’s reactions on meeting Sab illustrate Sab’s exile. At first he thinks that Sab is a country gentleman because of his noble bearing and light skin. Sab initially “passes”; he poses, although unintentionally, as a master. When Enrique discovers Sab is a slave, his form of address changes radically — to establish his superiority. We note the abrupt change in tone and language used, from: “Presumo que tengo el gusto de estar hablando con algún distinguido propietario de estas cercanías,” to: “¿Conque eres mulato? . . . Bien lo sospeché al principio . . . ” (130), when Sab reveals his status. Enrique’s inability to distinguish between slave and master, and Sab’s reply, reflect Gómez de Avellaneda’s abolitionism and the novel’s sentimentality.

His exchange with Enrique places Sab irrevocably outside the world of the privileged. When he later imagines exchanging souls with Enrique so that his exterior would match his interior being, he is again recognizing that despite his innate superiority, he holds only moral power. Thus, within the novel’s framework, the only actions he can take as an individual are self-destructive.

Sab is one of the principal characters who carries out a search for coherent discourses of salvation beyond the material world. Exiled from his mother’s continent, as well as from the language of power, because of his race and slave status, he speaks a discourse of liberty. Nevertheless, he specifically denies the utility of armed revolt: “. . . los esclavos arrastran pacientemente su cadena: acaso sólo necesitan para romperla, oír una voz que les grite: ‘¡sois hombres!, pero esa voz no será la mía . . . ’” (220). Ivan Schulman has suggested that this stance was necessary if Avellaneda wished to enlist the support of liberal landowners to the abolitionist cause (359). Nevertheless, it is also apparent that when Sab speaks about liberty in general, he echoes eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideas. His concept of freedom is linked to a double vision of God and nature as the great equalizers. Virtue is absolute, not relative, and therefore a proof of human equality. The novel thus exalts the figure of the slave as human above all (Rexach, “La Avellaneda” 250). Divinely ratified, virtue is identified with natural harmony:

Pero la virtud es para mí como la providencia . . . Entre los hombres la he buscado en vano. . . . No he podido encontrar entre los hombres la gran armonía que Dios ha establecido en la naturaleza (276).

There is a contradiction in the novel’s ideology about nature, which is used in this passage to describe classical beauty, balance, and control, and which elsewhere represents chaotic force. Here, tied to an eighteenth-century view of morality, it allows virtue, liberty, and equality to mesh into a vision of humanity inclusive of all races and both sexes.

In the paradoxical situation Sab contrives, however, liberty ultimately signifies the freely chosen enslavement of love. That is, he finally distinguishes between physical and moral liberty (Barreda 80). When he writes to Teresa,
Sab invokes Othello as a predecessor, finding it wonderful that a black man could be portrayed as king and lover in a story he and his master’s daughter Carlota had read together as children. He imitates Othello’s nobility of character by exchanging his winning lottery tickets for Carlota’s, thereby ensuring her sufficient dowry to marry the greedy Enrique Otway. No more stereotypical a romantic hero—solitary, courageous, self-sacrificing, and given to extreme passions—has been invented than the Afro-Cuban slave who dies of a broken heart. The influence of Chateaubriand and other French Romantics is clear (Barreda 73 and Harter 126). Sab’s characterization is also the product of a prior intellectual image, based on Rousseau—the noble Negro (Barreda 77). In addition, he displays characteristics typically expected of women; he is a superior being by virtue of his absolute consecration to love.

In his letter to Teresa, Sab, exiled “como el paria,” reveals the process by which his fantasies of conquest, riches, fame, and intellectual achievement gave way to the reigning image of love. Predestined by his nature to let passion rather than reason rule him, he is thereby condemned to death. But Avellaneda implies a social critique of his destiny as well. As Gutiérrez de la Solana suggests, “El destino trágico del héroe viene predeterminado por una injusticia social que la autora denuncia sin temor” (312). The paradox of ennobling self-destruction (so typical of both the romantic hero and the dominant ideology of how women were supposed to experience love) becomes more poignant with the specter of physical slavery that haunts the narrative, repeatedly reminding the reader of the anguish caused by dividing mind and body:

Todos mis entusiasmos se han reducido en uno solo ¡el amor! Un amor inmenso me ha devorado. El amor es la más bella y pura de las pasiones del hombre, y yo la he sentido en toda su omnipotencia.

En esta hora suprema, en que víctima suya me inmoló en el altar del dolor, paréceme que mi destino no ha sido inmortal ni vulgar. Una gran pasión llena y enmuelle una existencia. El amor y el dolor elevan el alma, y Dios se revela a los mártires de todo culto puro y noble (278-79).

Avellaneda here avails herself of the romantic view of love as a device for transcendence. Thus, Sab transcends the chains that bind him, by substituting a divinely endorseted slavery of love for such collective action as the rebellion he had earlier ruled out.

For Sab, finally, the language of love unites two contradictory conditions: slavery and freedom. Exiled from both love and power, he seeks salvation in martyrdom, a common path for those men and women whose choices are few. Sab demonstrates the apparently paradoxical striving for heroism through annihilation that conforms to the hagiographic tradition with which Avellaneda was certainly familiar.

The religious discourse is deliberate. Utilizing a language partly borrowed from the Spanish mystics, Sab reveals his soul’s nobility, and thus his essential humanity. When he describes a night during which he watched Carlota on her balcony, his love transforms her into an angel, if not Mary herself. She is divine beauty and purity incarnate. Carlota prays to God, and Sab joins her supplications:

... la luz de la luna, que barbaba su frente, parecía formar en torno suyo una aureola celestial. ... Nada había de terrestre y mortal en aquella figura: era un ángel que iba a volar al cielo. ...

... Un sentimiento confuso de felicidad vaga, indefinible, celestial, llenó mi alma, elevándola a un exaltación sublime en el que Dios y Carlota se confundían en mi alma (228).

Of course, the portrayal of Carlota as divine beauty repeats a romantic trope. Nevertheless, it buttresses Sab’s essentially human status as much as it reveals his deep love for Carlota.

Women and slaves historically have created subversive subcultures, using religion as an instrument of asserting indirect power. In the passage cited above (describing Sab’s mystical experience), Gómez de Avellaneda provides a new twist to the traditional treatment of amor a lo divino, which views the ineffable as sacred. By utilizing a male (although marginalized) character to portray woman as icon, she implicitly constructs a reference to her world outside the novel, and thus links one kind of exile to others, using an orthodox Catholic framework. The novel’s religious underpinnings provide a justification for its vindication of love, liberty, and equality.

Sab’s uniqueness makes him appear false. He is a white dressed in slave’s clothing, and even expresses color prejudice when he remarks that “a pesar de su color mi madre era hermosa...” (131). As Pedro Barreda so tellingly states, “This conflict between a black ethnus and a white ego dramatically accentuates the romantic character of the protagonist” (80). It also emphasizes the body/mind split suggested earlier, since Sab, like
the women characters in this novel, is forced to cut himself off from his true self in order to act like a slave. This statement reveals as well Gómez de Avellaneda's unconscious acceptance of the norms of her class and society, and demonstrates her own internal conflict, regarding race and sex privilege. Her characters express their author's alienation, and attempt to free themselves.

Sab's self-justification and declaration of his right to be free and equal clearly describes a conflict between human injustice and God's grace. Appearing as it does in an abolitionist novel, this discursive juxtaposition provides a strong argument for antislavery ideas—God's absolute virtue. By linking religious morality to abolitionism, and immorality to slavery, Avellaneda pre-empts and reverses the old argument of black inferiority. Sab says:

Pero si no es Dios, Teresa, sino los hombres que me han forzado este destino, si ellos han cortado las alas que Dios concedio a mi alma, . . . ellos son los que deben temer al presentarse delante de Dios: porque tienen que dar cuenta terrible, porque han contraido una responsabilidad inmensa (280).

This was, of course, the reasoning used in the abolitionist movement of the United States as well. It was reinforced both there and in Sab with a language reminiscent of the Bible. The prophecy made by Camaguey's soul, which announces revenge for the conquest, finds its structural parallel in Sab's prophecy of an apocalyptic ending, with a vindicating day of judgment: “el día de la verdad amanecerá claro y brillante,” (281) but Sab himself remains outside circles of power until his death.

Another aspect of his discourse is ultimately unifying: he links all forms of slavery to each other. In his letter to Teresa, Sab includes women's slavery to their socially imposed roles. Women entering marriage, he says, commit themselves to a slave contract of the worst kind, since they cannot change masters. By using similar language to describe women's and blacks' situation, Avellaneda emphasizes the servitude inherent to both their conditions. She also categorically states, through Sab, that women's fate is worse. Still, his method of accomplishing the quest for salvation evades all possibility for future change, just as it inexorably causes his death. Sab, tragic hero of romanticism, stylized slave, but eloquent spokesperson opposing all forms of servitude, exemplifies his creator's ideals and conflicts. Through his characterization, Gómez de Avellaneda both critiques and betrays her complicity in the norms of her time.

Unlike Carlota, both Sab and Teresa fulfill their destinies. They nevertheless far more concretely epitomize the marginalized status of those outside the social spheres of power than she does. Sab is a black slave; Teresa is a poor, orphaned—and not beautiful—woman. They are twin souls in the narrative; their communication, unknown to the other characters, and based on their condition as outsiders, as well as their capacity for deep passions, forms a counter-discourse in the novel.

Teresa's serene appearance disguises a noble soul capable of great passion. When we first meet her, the narrator claims that she has eyes “capaces de un lenguaje terrible” (137), thus pointing to the distinction between her calm exterior (body) and passionate interior (soul). A poor and orphaned relative living in her benefactor's home, she cannot participate fully in the social discourse apparently so close to her. She therefore withdraws into herself. At moments of extreme emotional crisis, her position as outsider is emphasized. When Enrique, whom she secretly loves, decides to travel during a tropical storm, “un solo individuo . . . permanecía indiferente a la tempestad, y a cuanto le rodeaba . . . era Teresa, que . . . parecía sumergida en profunda distracción” (152). Thus, she removes herself from the difficulties of revealing her true feelings.

She and Sab each choose a distinct road to salvation. As we have seen, for Sab it is an ennobling, dramatic death, sweetened with the knowledge of his self-sacrifice for his beloved. Teresa's solution is more practical; she, like many women in Hispanic cultures, finds refuge and peace in the enclosed environment of the convent. This apparently paradoxical method of segregating herself from the world in which she has always lived bears closer examination. Historically, by becoming a nun, a woman could avoid some of the dangers and disadvantages allotted to her sex. She also avoids the perils of reification to which women have historically been subjected. Her change in state includes the possibility of building a more meaningful life. By donning the clothing of an outsider to the material world and remaining inside the convent, she transcends
her "otherness." For Teresa, barred from all other paths, taking the veil constitutes a means of taking power. She establishes herself as a whole, integrated being by seeking to transcend her material self, and thereby resolves the split between her body and soul. Having dissolved the bonds that forced her into a marginal position, she achieves salvation. Teresa lives out her life fulfilled, and at peace. In this sense, she is the true heroine of Sab.

Before the resolution takes place, however, the narrator emphasizes Sab's and Teresa's solitude and the impossibility of their communication with those more privileged than they, and contrasts this with the meaningful interchange between the two outsiders.

Sab's and Teresa's friendship is ultimately established through their mutual condition as exiles. Their relationship is, of course, astonishing and revolutionary, considering the time and place in which the novel was written (Cruz 42). Meaningful communication of any kind between a white woman and a black male slave was generally unacceptable in mid-nineteenth century Europe and America. Gómez de Avellaneda manages to make it credible, although she stops short of a full-blown love affair between the two; each has another love object.

The moment of mutual recognition between Teresa and Sab occurs about fifty pages after the novel begins, when both feel themselves to be outsiders:

Solamente dos personas quedaron en el patio: Teresa de pie, inmóvil en el umbral de la puerta que acababan de atravesar sin reparar en ella los dos amantes, y Sab, de pie también, y también inmóvil en frente de ella... Ambos se miraron y ambos se estremecieron, porque como en un espejo había visto cada uno de ellos en la mirada del otro la dolorosa pasión que en aquel momento le dominaba...

Se han entendido y hueye cada uno de las miradas del otro (176-77).

Here Sab and Teresa, both invisible to the person each loves, become visible to each other. Without words, as in a frozen piece of film footage, their bodies mirror and recognize each other as being in the same situation. The effect of this kind of imagery is particularly interesting for its manipulation of the male and female characters into a single integrated portrait. That is, the female author uses the mirror motif—traditionally associated with women—to equate Sab and Teresa. The implicit connotations of female bodily awareness and vanity are used to assert a counter-discourse. Despite their initial fear of mutual identification, Sab and Teresa subsequently forge intimate bonds because of their communion of spirit. Thus, in the highly dramatic nocturnal scene in which their only long interview takes place, Sab openly declares his hopeless passion for Carlota. Gastón Baquero suggests that Sab contains one of the first serious psychological studies of interracial love (quoted in Indán 85-6). Teresa, fascinated with "el poder de aquel amor inmenso, incontrollable," realizes that "ella era capaz de amar del mismo modo y que un corazón como el de Sab era aquél que el suyo necesitaba" (223). She then offers herself as Sab's life companion, a remarkable act which in itself graphically and concretely illustrates Avellaneda's abolitionism and feminism, as well as her understanding of the unity implicit in all forms of marginalization.

If Avellaneda's treatment of character reflects her alienation as a woman in a sexist society, her treatment of nature originates in her condition as exile from Cuba. Her obvious concessions to the romantic descriptive mode are tinged with nostalgia. Cuba, her native land, is exoticized in an imaginative idealization of the tropical landscape described with abundant local vocabulary, which is then footnoted for her European readers. This method of writing about the natural world she remembers, combined with her view of the restrictions imposed on women, encase the novel's author in a system of signs revelatory of her alienation from her contemporaries. Thus, she is writing about exiles from the social discourse of power as a double exile herself.

The tropics as described in Sab reveal a combination of the romantic's attraction to foreign — and therefore exotic — nature, and the cronistas' testimonial discourse, which in Spanish, the language of the Old World, attempts to convey the New World's previously unknown flora and fauna. Landscape description also demonstrates nostalgia — product of the author's recent separation from her patria, as well as her neo-classical training. Tumultuous, terrifying, and threatening extremes of heat and storm conditions reiterate the romantic use of nature as a reflection of human sentiments. The cosmos is thus humanized, and landscape anthropomorphized. In addition, and despite the narrator's evident sympathy with the natural environment she is portraying, the text's descriptive language...
reveals Avellaneda's ambivalence about the landscape of her youth. Throughout, the writing oscillates in typically romantic fashion between idealizing rapture about the island's beauty and an underlying sense of fear associated with its enormous and unpredictable physical power. In a manner paradoxically reminiscent of the eighteenth century, the novel imposes order on nature—perceived as chaotic—through timely storms and calms, domestication—visible in Sab's garden,—and withdrawal from tropical landscape, exemplified in Teresa's enclosure in a convent. Finally, author's footnotes explain indigenous plants and animal life, thus also taming nature.

Three and a half centuries after Columbus first attempted to describe the New World to the Spanish monarchs, Sab's footnotes explain the various plants, birds, animals, and other natural phenomena of Cuba. This curious informational device indicates how strange America remained to Europeans, even by mid-nineteenth century. Descriptive biology also serves a pedagogical function; the author becomes an interpreter of American reality for her readers. The natural world of the tropics, exotic to the Spaniard who has never experienced anything similar, is tamed through presentation in an apparently objective language. Despite Avellaneda's long descriptions emphasizing the magical quality of this landscape, the scientific explanations, which appear in author's footnotes, often contradict its power. Romantic fascination with supernatural phenomena also informs the narrative, as does an essentially religious attitude toward the material world.

This oscillation among the various modes of descriptive expression occurs, for example, during an outing to see the caves of Cubitas in which all the major characters participate. The travelers approach Cubitas at night; the nocturnal scene anticipates the mysterious event that follows. Personification of flora establishes the supernatural quality of the landscape:

A medida que se aproximaban a Cubitas, el aspecto de la naturaleza era más sombrío: bien pronto desapareció casi del todo la vigorosa y variada vegetación de la tierra prieta, y la roja no ofreció más que esparramados yuruguanos* y algún ingratado jagüey,** que parecían en la noche figuras caprichosas de un mundo fantástico (184).

Here, the description of vegetation utilizes a telluric metaphor to describe the destiny of Blacks and Indians in Cuba. Thus, the land itself is linked to the fate of the subjugated races that inhabit it. The red earth, like the indigenous population, is sterile, almost extinct; the dark earth, like those of African descent, still demonstrates vigor. This passage is reinforced immediately after in the text with Martina's prophecy, explained by Sab, about the future of Cuba. Thus, romantic discourse, in which an environment where plants become "capricious figures of a fantastic world" is so often created, also serves to predict the fate of each of the races inhabiting Cuba. Of course, the language also evokes societal construction of female characteristics (Ortner). These constructs are in turn associated with the realm of imagination, the irrational side of human thought, feeling, and action, equated in this passage with the flora perceived at night. On the other hand, this quotation contains two footnotes explaining "yuruguanos" and "jagüey," written in "scientific" discourse. These lines (and the notes that accompany them) offer an internal juxtaposition between a romantic and neoclassical vision of nature.

One of the narrative's essential structural elements is the juxtaposition between popular and scientific discourse. Gómez de Avellaneda assumes an outsider's stance in her preference for folk stories. At the same time, however, she attempts to authorize herself with the eighteenth-century scientific discourse in which she had been educated. Nature is therefore an active component of the action and ideology of Sab, not just a backdrop for character portrayal. Although the scientific footnotes scattered throughout the text serve a pedagogical function, they also dilute the landscape's lyrical quality. This occurs in the following lines; the description (in part) is:

Ninguna hoja se estremecía, ningún sonido interrumpía el silencio pavoroso de la naturaleza. Bandadas de auras* poblaban el aire, oscureciendo la luz rojiza del sol poniente . . . (151).

The text of the footnote (in part) is:

* El aura es ave algo parecida al cuervo, pero más grande. Cuando amenaza la tempestad innumerables bandadas de estas aves pueblan el aire. . . . (151).

Immediately apparent is the contrast between the romantic language clearly visible in the lyricism of the first description cited above, and the didactic tone of the definition of "aura." In the tension between the two per-
spectives, we perceive the conflicting experience of the author.

The climax of the excursion to Cubitas shows the same split in discourse. The travelers see a strange bright light. Although the author offers a scientific explanation for its existence in a footnote, she writes that she prefers the imaginative popular version prevalent in that area. Under the circumstances in which Avellaneda found herself, it is not surprising that she preferred the language and perspective of "the people" in the stories from which they drew cultural strength. Not only does such a literary style reproduce a romantic trope, but it also illustrates her sense of community with those of marginalized status. The people there believe that the light is the soul of murdered Indian chieftain Camagney, which appears nightly to "anunciar a los descendientes de sus bárbaros asesinos la venganza del cielo que tarde o temprano caerá sobre ellos" (186). Martina's prophecy, recounted by Sab, clarifies the reasons for that vengeance; he places her words in a legitimizing historical context: "La tierra que fue regada con sangre una vez lo será aun otra: los descendientes de los opresores serán oprimidos, y los hombres negros serán los terribles vengadores de los hombres cobrizos" (187). Both prophecies' biblical tone is evident. The romantic taste for ghost stories and supernatural phenomena thus supports her critique of the Spanish conquest, and pronounces — in apocalyptic tones — its destruction.

The characterization and language of Sab rely on the romantic canon. This does not imply, however, that the novel is historically inaccurate. Sab was banned in Cuba from its first publication date, because of its abolitionist content. When she published an edition of her Obras literarias between 1869 and 1871, Gómez de Avellaneda chose to omit the novel, so as to secure the lucrative Cuban market (Barreda 74). Sab's antislavery ideology is clearly a concrete manifestation of the romantic exaltation of all forms of freedom and rebellion. It relies, however, on historical as well as literary circumstances of the period. As Gutiérrez de la Solana states, "La Avellaneda entrelazó la romántica, platónica y sacrificada pasión de Sab y su condición de esclavo para crear un destino trágico irreversible y atacar la esclavitud" (311). The novel not only reflects contemporary discussion of abolitionism, but also of feminism. Neither of these themes, however, is a result of merely theoretical interest in current issues; they spring from Avellaneda's lived experience. As we have seen, she uses the issue of abolition as a means of expressing her condemnation of all forms of slavery.

There is little doubt that Gómez de Avellaneda felt herself to be alienated from the people and world surrounding her. Through her depiction of nature, characterization, and use of multiple fictive discourses, she displays her own painful separation from dominant language and modes of behavior of the time. Alluding to the contrast between her fame and her existential anguish, she wrote:

... me encuentro extranjera en el mundo y aislada en la naturaleza. Siento la necesidad de morir. Y sin embargo vivo y pereceré dichosa a los ojos de la multitud. (Auto-biografía 90; quoted in Virgilio 258)

Thus, it is no coincidence that in Sab many forms of marginalization and oppression are expressed, and then equated.

NOTES

I would like to thank Electa Arenal, Beth Ferris, and especially Lynn Van Dyke for reading and commenting upon this essay.

1Significantly, one critic describes her literary models at the time as being Madame de Stael and George Sand. See Lazo 89.

2Here and throughout, I define activities of discourse as "self-addressed communications, such as unuttered soliloquies and spoken exchanges between characters." See Lindstrom 30-1.

3Martina, spokeswoman for the almost extinct indigenous peoples, also uses a kind of outsider's language.


5See for example Miller 209.

6Avellaneda develops her view of marriage as a necessary evil in an often-quoted passage from one of her letters to Cepeda. Her definition of marriage, however, is startlingly modern. She says, "Para mí es santo todo vínculo contraído con recíproca confianza y buena fe, y sólo veo desnuda donde hay mentira y codicia." This passage is quoted in, for example, Lazo 90.

7Boyer (294) suggests that for Gómez de Avellaneda, slavery is lamentable but irreparable.

8For a detailed analysis of these advantages see Arenal and Schau.

9Gómez de Avellaneda seriously considered becoming a nun at several critical points in her life.

10In asserting this, I do not forget the large number of European scientific expeditions that documented their studies of American flora and fauna in the eighteenth century.

11In a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar at Yale University (1981-82), Roberto González Echeva-
rría discussed this relationship between discovery and descriptive language.

"For further discussion of this point, see Percas Ponseti 348 and Santos 281, among others.

WORKS CITED


