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FOUNDATIONAL FICTIONS

The National Romances of Latin America

Doris Sommer

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*for Allen, who has taught
me so much.*

4

SAB C'EST MOI

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda could well have said something like Flaubert's quip about *Bovary*, because the Cuban writer evidently identified with the hero of her abolitionist novel, *Sab* (1841). Sab is a mulatto slave hopelessly in love with his young white mistress and on the verge of rebellion, precisely the kind of explosive (self)portrayal that allows the novelist to construct a paradoxical, interstitial, and ultimately new or American persona. In other words, it was never easy to identify "la Avellaneda," or Gertrudis the Great as she is also called, in conventional or stable terms. Born in Cuba in 1814 to an impoverished Spanish aristocrat and a wealthy creole mother, and more or less settled in Spain from 1836 until her death in 1873, her national allegiance and the glory that she brings are still disputed by both countries. And although feminist readers of Spanish American literature are giving her the kind of attention that amounts to a gender-specific claim on her work,¹ Avellaneda has always figured in the canonical, overwhelmingly male mainstream of Hispanic literature.² Neither Old World nor New World, neither a woman's writer nor a man's, Gertrudis was both, or something different; she was Sab.

Her identification with him is obviously not autobiographical. Neither is it simply mimetic in the sense of representing the writer's characteristics and passions.³ As daring as this particular example of what might be called a spiritual mimesis is, given the fact that novelist and protagonist differ in apparently every conceivable way including gender, race, and class, the general literary practice is rather common and would by itself have been far less noteworthy than what Avellaneda does here. The stunning thing about this self-portrait is that it identifies author with apparently helpless slave through their shared productive func-

tion, their literary labor conditioned in both by the need to subvert and to reconstruct. The obscure slave represents the privileged novelist because both vent their passions by writing and because their literary slippages destabilize the rhetorical system that constrains them.

Sab writes at the end of the book, after his pitiful story of humiliation and loss. Exhausted and on the verge of death, he writes a long letter about Carlota, the chestnut-haired mistress and childhood playmate whom he loves desperately. And while writing "Sab's letter," probably in 1839, Avellaneda is also writing a long autobiographical letter to the one man whom she was passionate about and who managed to ignore her during a lifetime.⁴ In Sab's letter, Avellaneda's hero declares his love for the unsuspecting girl and explains the other interests that had been motivating the narrative. Sab's name at the end of the letter serves as the signature for an entire novel that seemed to be a simple story about a slave who is ignored, misunderstood, and passive in the face of unequal social relationships. (The literature on Sab as "noble savage" is rather predictable.)⁵ But the letter shows him as the writer of his own story and the only one who could fulfill Carlota's dream. Her dream was to marry Enrique Otway, the handsome son of an opportunist English merchant. Until she reads Sab's letter, Carlota is naive about Enrique's wavering interest in her (depending on how he assesses her dowry) and about her stoic cousin Teresa's infatuation with the same blond idol. Now Carlota learns that Enrique almost broke his engagement to her, after realizing that the dowry was indeed depleted; and she finds out that Sab had restored her wealth by slipping his winning lottery ticket into her mail. She also realizes that Sab then literally killed himself and his mount while racing on horseback to call Enrique back with the news of her good fortune.

The letter is written, as I said, afterward, while Sab is dying, and it is addressed to Teresa for safekeeping. She takes it into the convent where she chooses to live out her short life, and Carlota marries the man who soon proves, even to her, that he was unworthy of love. About to die, Teresa reveals the letter to Carlota. Thanks to Sab, whom she now recognizes as a soulmate, Carlota finally learns how much women and slaves have

in common. "Oh women! Poor, blind victims! Just like slaves, they patiently drag their chains and lower their heads under the yoke of human law" (221).⁶ Her faith in love (and liberation) revives, though, with the rest of Sab's letter. In it, Carlota manages to reread her romance in light of what could have been.

In other words, the end discovers Sab as the agent and the authority of the very story that portrayed him as a defenseless object of history. The signature authorizes the novel and leaves no doubt regarding his constructive role in the book. Already absent by the time he signs off, Sab makes himself present to Carlota, his mistress and ideal reader; he can present himself candidly by writing. In the same way, Avellaneda makes herself present to Cuba in a book written far away, from the absence that paradoxically makes possible the passionate supplement called writing. Sab, as much as she, writes from beyond hope. But much earlier than this signature, we suspect that Sab writes, directs, and manipulates everything we are reading. It is Sab, after all, who directs Enrique Otway to Carlota's house at the very beginning of the book; and it is he who decides to save the unworthy rival after Enrique falls unconscious in a storm. Later, Sab is the one who provides a guided tour through the treacherous caves of Cubitas where his master's family planned an outing to impress Enrique. And it is Sab again who interchanges people's fates by displacing lottery tickets. Finally it is Sab who determines their destinies by racing to stop Otway from embarking for Europe.

Throughout, Sab produces his story. Gertrudis did the same, within the limits that circumscribed them both. Only he, along with her, has enough command of the narrative to sound out the most intimate secrets of other characters, of Enrique for example.

Yo he sido la sombra que por espacio de muchos días ha seguido constantemente sus pasos; yo el que ha estudiado a todas horas su conducta, sus miradas, sus pensamientos . . . ; yo quien ha sorprendido las palabras que se le escapaban cuando se creía solo y aun las que profería en sus ensueños, cuando dormía: yo quien ha ganado a sus esclavos para saber de ellos las conversaciones que se suscitaban entre padre e hijo, . . . (154)

[I have been the shadow that has constantly repeated his steps for many days now; I the one who has all the time been studying his conduct, his way of looking, his thoughts . . . ; I am the one who has surprised the words that escaped him when he thought himself alone and even the ones he offered up in daydreams, and when he slept: I am the one who has won over his slaves in order to know the conversations that take place between father and son.]

The productive confusion of gender, and also of race and class, that the identification between Sab and Gertrudis implies is among the liberating linguistic disencounters that this novel achieves. But the best example is perhaps the description of Sab himself. In the very first scene, when Otway stops Sab to ask for directions to Carlota's house, the slave is introduced through a series of negations or absences. He is not a landowning peasant, although by his appearance he could easily be mistaken for one; nor does he have an easily identifiable color.

No parecía un criollo blanco, tampoco era negro ni podía creérsele descendiente de los primeros pobladores de la Antillas. Su rostro presentaba un compuesto singular en que se descubría el cruzamiento de dos razas diversas, y en que se amalgamaban, por decirlo así, los rasgos de la casta africana con los de la europea, sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto. (23)

[He didn't look like a white creole, neither was he black nor could he be taken for a descendant of the first inhabitants of the Antilles. His face presented a singular composition in which one could discover the crossing of two different races, an amalgamation, so to speak, of African and European features that doesn't add up, however, to a perfect mulatto.]

It is as if the inherited signs of a European language could not catch up with an elusive American referent. Before describing him in positive terms, the text first has to erase or cross out a certain ethnocultural linguistic space in order to compose a new sign. Sab, and by association Avellaneda, is different, somehow foreign to established categories of representation. In the next paragraph, Avellaneda recomposes the very same signifiers she has just destabilized, or liberated, in an almost incoherent way when she describes Sab's color as "a yellowish white

with a tinge of black in the background" (24). The autonomy of each racial signifier was negated a few lines earlier only so that they could be amalgamated here. Sab is a new incarnation of an extinct aboriginal "Cuban," one who exceeds or violates the strict racial categories that have made slavery work. The reader, and Otway, are practically blinded to the existing social relationships by the lightness of Sab's skin. And it is this racial indefiniteness, this new shade of social meaning, that may be among the most radical features of the novel.

Despite the apparent incoherence of this exhaustive catalogue of colors, Sab is recognized as a typical resident of central Cuba, both by Enrique Otway and by the reader. The incoherence, in other words, owes to a certain linguistic obsolescence rather than to mistaken perceptions. The novel begins, then, with an aporia between language and experience, a ruse that would be repeated, significantly, in more than one canonical woman's novel. A particularly loving example, one I cannot help but mention, is Teresa de la Parra's nostalgic series of vignettes about plantation life in Venezuela called *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca* (1929). As will be seen in the last chapter, the playfully deliberate aporia between Snow White's name and her color, among many others, allows for the conciliatory effect of humor and affection.

The result in both *Sab* and *Memorias* is an awareness that our reality suggests its imaginary form, to borrow Lacan's terms, but that it still lacks a symbolic expression. If reality had an expressible form, if we could imagine an adequate sign that would represent Sab, a sign that would name this nameless pariah in the slave-holding language of the "parvenus," that sign might be, perhaps, Cuban. Then we would recognize him to be as legitimate and autochthonous in this New World as were the indigenous, or as Spanish says it, the "natural" masters of the island. In fact, the term "natural child," meaning bastard in the established language and attributed to both Sab and Teresa, takes on a legitimating value by association, because the orphaned Sab is spiritually related to the aboriginal masters through his adoptive mother Martina, an old slave who insists she is Indian royalty.

If we ask ourselves how Avellaneda could identify with so

complex a character, one so difficult to locate between negation and excess, her motives announce themselves in a cluster of possibilities. And all of them are bound up with the need in both subjects to transgress the symbolic order, the order of the father, in their effort to construct an identity. Before I try to specify the nature of their excess or transgression, it is probably worth noting that the reigning patriarchal order in this novel is itself in profound crisis. No character here can be considered a legitimate or effective father. Don Carlos de B., Sab's master and Carlota's father, is in general incapable of ordering anything; he is too sweet or naive, or simply too lazy, to provide continuity and cohesion for the symbolic realm. His moribund son, the only one in a house full of daughters, underlines Don Carlos's nullity as a progenitor and gives their tasteful slavocratic world a definite expiration date. It is easy to see that Enrique's crass and foreign father, Jorge Otway, is just as problematic. Despite his energy and occasional financial coups, the man is too calculating and graceless to be a legitimate model. And his son is even less promising because he turns out to be Jorge's clone, lacking the will to confront his father with alternative values. By comparison, despite the fact that Sab combines the contrasting virtues of disinterested sweetness and energetic dedication, he cannot aspire to be a father. What Sab lacks is any claim to legitimacy in the patriarchal symbolic order, precisely because he has no father and no patronym, because there is no space in his language in which he could occupy the place of the name of the father.

In this social vacuum, "author-ity" can pass on to new hands, feminine and/or mulatto hands. Except for Martina, there are no mothers either, no one but Sab's "indigenous mother" to hold out the promise, or the memory, of an alternative order to the slavocratic patriarchy. She, the mistress of Cubitas, is an inspiration for wresting a kind of independence from bondage. From the space of his social exile Sab can wrest a kind of independence too; the space allows him to construct a different "artificial" order that can recognize his natural legitimacy. And this is exactly what the slave does when he plants a garden in the middle of the plantation. The text tells us that Sab breaks this new ground in order to provide Carlota with an ideal space

language might require of women. But more than anything else, we admire her for the novelty of a fictional woman who falls in love with the abstract principles that Sab represents. Nevertheless, Avellaneda doesn't insist on establishing a balance between male and female characters. The regular coincidence here between the feminine and the admirable is borne out by a *dramatis personae* in which all the women are noble (heightened to an almost comic level in the "Indian princess," Martina), while the men range from the feminized ideal of Sab to the ineffectual Don Carlos and the opportunist Otway Senior.

This ironic association of vir-tue with women, as well as the insistent parallels that Avellaneda establishes between the condition of women and that of slaves, has led to various and eminently justified feminist readings of *Sab*. But for the purpose of specifying the feminist nature of this novel, it seems important to remember that the characters and much of the erotic struggle in the text are *typical* of the period. Or they became typical once other Latin American novels repeat, or independently invent and vary, her fissured characters. Those novels will create a context around this early one, making Avellaneda's daring project part of a legitimate canon. This doesn't minimize the effect of the novel. On the contrary, it makes the impact felt globally in the continent. Although some readers choose to focus on what makes Avellaneda's novel particularly feminist, arguing that she is writing against the male tradition (and even that she uses abolitionism as a code for the more radical feminism),⁹ I am more concerned to show that she was at the vanguard of what would become the standard male canon and to suggest that the canon itself is remarkably feminized.

Even if we wanted to read Avellaneda as a lone rebel, we might find it impossible, by now, to bracket the later nineteenth-century novels through which we inevitably read hers. Our approach to her is necessarily like Borges's reading of Menard's *Quijote*. It is contaminated, or enriched, by layers of intervening readings. For some readers today, affected as we almost unavoidably are by feminist and more generally poststructuralist lessons in reading, nineteenth-century romantic novels produce an uncanny sense of familiarity and contemporaneity. The Latin American canon of romantic novels seems to wage a con-

sistent struggle against classical habits of oppositional thinking. Instead of keeping race, class, gender, and cultural differences pure, the "historical" romances that came to be considered national novels in their respective countries married hero to heroine across those former barriers. After the wars of Independence and the civil wars that followed in many Latin American countries, insisting on pure categories became literally self-destructive. If nations were to survive and to prosper, they had to mitigate racial and regional antagonisms and to coordinate the most diverse national sectors through the hegemony of an enlightened elite; that is, through mutual consent rather than coercion. Even the most elitist and racist founding fathers understood that their project of national consolidation under a civil government needed racial hybridization. Of course for some, such as Argentina's political architects Sarmiento and Alberdi, the plans did not project a union of whites with blacks (and much less with Indians), but rather the marriage between Hispanics, allegedly incapable of liberty and progress, with Anglo-Saxons who could take advantage of the economic opportunities that the creoles kept missing. Still, Argentine consolidation, after Buenos Aires's centralism struggled against the interior's insistence on federating power, was posed more in interregional than interracial terms. Clearly, though, this kind of political embrace as well as the color-coded variations of national amalgamation implied a certain exclusivity, principally of sectors that would not fit the enlightened plans: these sectors were the Indians and gauchos in Argentina; the blacks in Galvan's *Enriquillo* (Dominican Republic, 1882); and in the Cuba that Avellaneda represented, the ideally excluded sectors were the creole "sugarocracy" and the English interlopers.

Unlike the militant populist novels that would follow, where heroes measure their manliness against imperialist or dictatorial contestants for their country's love, the early novels celebrated a domestic, sentimental, and almost feminized brand of heroism. Instead of the caudillo, or local boss, whose power came from being at the top of a rigidly patriarchal pyramid of supporters, the sentimental and bourgeois hero of the times developed more lateral relationships with fellow citizens. He

exercised a freedom of (market) choice, for example, by picking his romantic partner; and he conquered her by love, always aware that she enjoyed the same kind of freedom. Consequently, the bond between the two, that is the hegemonic structure that coordinates diverse interests by appealing to their mutual benefit, seems to dispense with the need for military or any other type of coercive power. Instead, the love affair replaces power with desire, as if power and desire were two radically different things.

The obvious question with regard to *Sab* is what Avellaneda's Cuba has to do with this post-Independence esthetic and the related mandate to call an internal truce after the civil wars. Cuba in the 1830s was many decades away from achieving independence, let alone reconciling differences at home after Spain had left. It was also far from abolishing slavery, as Spain's other colonies had done after independence, and therefore far from creating at least the legitimate space for racial amalgamation. In some ways, Cuba represents the mirror image of Brazil, the other apparently anomalous and long-lasting slave society. Neither country fits the general Latin American pattern of Independence in the 1810s and 1820s followed by civil wars that ended by midcentury. Cuba was among the last colonies that Spain lost at the end of the century, whereas Brazil, long independent from Europe, was a sovereign monarchy at home. Yet both countries were slavocracies until the end of the century, when Cuba rid itself of Spain and Brazil became a republic. If slavery created a bond between them, it also should have distanced them so much more from countries where slavery had been abolished, at least officially, with early independence. Therefore, it is most significant that Cuban and Brazilian national romances look so much like the others. It suggests a cultural and even political coherence in the literary/political project to reconcile oppositions, to embrace the other, that goes deeper than the historical differences among the countries.

This is remarkable, I cannot help repeating, because Cuba was still at odds with Spain; it was preparing militarily and culturally for a series of struggles that would last for decades. Nevertheless, the conciliatory genre of romance in this and other abolitionist novels seems to have seduced even the Cu-

bans. Perhaps romance takes over because internal unity would be necessary for the fight against Spain. Romance between previously segregated sectors might ideally create the national unity among whites and blacks, ex-masters and ex-slaves, that the war for Independence would need. In Cuba, in other words, abolitionism becomes a *condition*, not a result, of independence. The fact that *Sab* makes a second appearance during the Independence struggle (in 1871, the same year that Avellaneda expunges it from her respectable *Complete Works*), and serialized in a Cuban revolutionary journal in New York, suggests how important an ideological weapon this novel must have been.¹⁰ Even if its romantic project were insufficient to the goal of establishing mutual love between the races, the rigid and irrational distinctions that belonged to the old order would have to be toned down before independence could be a safe alternative for Cuba's white minority. The threat of slave uprisings, and lessons from Haiti's revolution, surely had something to do with the departure of Avellaneda's family from Cuba in 1836.

Critics are probably right to point out that *Sab* represents a perhaps feminized and radicalized version of the "noble black lover" theme so popular in romantic literature. From Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; or the Royal Slave* (1688), through Victor Hugo's high romantic version in *Bug-Jargal* (1826), where for the first time love tragically (and violently) crosses race and class lines, to the abolitionist novels written in Cuba, black heroes were conquering white audiences.¹¹ Part of their heroic appeal, no doubt, was the cathartic effect they produced when they lost, inevitably, to unjust but unmovable laws of the state. In the context of contemporary Cuban abolitionist novels,¹² Avellaneda's variation amounts to dislocating the dramatis personae of the tragic genre, perhaps following Hugo's revolutionary move.¹³ One specific dislocation makes her invert the expected racial identities between lover and beloved. Spanish American novels that describe interracial affairs have often been a loving or eroticized version of the white man's burden. They describe an active lover who is both male and white (the liberal bourgeoisie) and the yielding object of his galvanizing attention who is often a mulatta (the masses to be incorporated in a hegemonic project). Examples that come to mind range

from Cuba's canonical *Cecilia Valdés* (1839, 1882) by Cirilo Villaverde, to one of the most important populist novels, Venezuela's *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by Rómulo Gallegos.¹⁴ When the lover is a slave, his beloved is usually a slave too. But, as Mary Cruz notes in her prologue to Avellaneda's novel, *Sab* is the only "man of the enslaved race" who dares to desire a white woman.¹⁵

This evidently scandalized or terrified the Spanish authorities in Cuba, as well as powerful groups of merchants and planters who dominated the sugar economy of the island,¹⁶ since the book was banned almost immediately. It is difficult to know, however, whether *Sab* scandalized them any more than did a contemporary novel such as Suárez y Romero's *Francisco*, which could be published only posthumously and abroad. Its delayed publication date may have had something to do with the fact that *Francisco* is an open denunciation of slavery. The fatal love triangle that frames the narrative, involving a noble black slave, the mulatta slave who reciprocates his love, and the lascivious white master who stops at nothing to possess her, seems almost a pretext for the novel's relentless and detailed review of slavery's institutionalized horrors. Throughout, Suárez underscores Francisco's Christian meekness. In *Sab* the censure is more subtle and the response more violent. Slavery is not its most urgent problem; the problem is rather a general system of unequal, binary, esthetic, and social relationships between light and dark, men and women, masters and servants.¹⁷

This difference in focus—from racial bondage to racist bonding—is refined in far greater detail and over many more pages in *Cecilia Valdés* and helps to account for its claim as Cuba's national novel after the period of abolition (1880–1886).¹⁸ The story is familiar even among Cubans who never read the novel, for one reason, because it became popular literally as a revue, a staged musical by Gonzalo Roig.¹⁹ Understandably, the nation constituted after the formal institution of slavery is replaced by more delicate and daunting discriminations may identify more with Villaverde's tragic rehearsal of elaborately exclusive habits than with Avellaneda's projection of unity. His cast to the color scheme, therefore, deserves more than passing mention in this chapter dedicated to the other less pessimistic, more rebelliously feminist novel.

Hardly anyone in *Cecilia Valdés* escapes the charge of racism, not the mulatta or her white lover, and certainly not the white narrator. A first, far shorter version, published contemporaneously with abolitionist novels in 1839 but inoffensive enough to appear in Cuba and then in Spain, had featured a predictably idealized heroine, the omniscient author who knew her worth, and little of the flair for provoking self-doubt that distinguishes the four-part novel of 1882.²⁰ In it, the narrator continually calls attention to his own social blinders by delaying information long after it is news to us. It is delayed, a bit transparently and with a studied clumsiness that leaves the teller tellingly benighted because, for one thing, there is no free-thinking Teresa here who knows enough to listen to blacks. As in *Sab*, it is the slaves who can tell this story about Cecilia, the daughter of an unknown white gentleman and a mulatta who goes mad when her lover removes the baby to an orphanage. That first tragedy is reversed too late to save the mother, but Cecilia gets to grow up partly in her grandmother's house where she learns that any white husband is preferable to a black one, and partly on the street where she falls in mutual love with Leonardo Gamboa, the spoiled son of a Spanish slaver who—horrors!—happens to be her father too. Neither one knows that their affair is incestuous, nor that their conflicting expectations—love for him, marriage for her—will clash violently. To underline the potential for perverse productivity in the incest theme, Leonardo's youngest sister is Cecilia's double, so that if he and Adela "were not flesh and blood siblings, they would have been lovers" (Villaverde, 57).

The other woman in Leonardo's life is Isabel Ilincheta, elegant, correct, a fitting counterpart to independent and candid Cecilia. Isabel seems in excess of standard good-girl heroines; in fact she is more the hero, modeled perhaps after Villaverde's independentist wife.²¹ It is Isabel who runs her father's business—growing coffee rather than the more labor-intensive sugar; and her womanly good looks don't interfere with a markedly virile appeal.²² The fact that Leonardo can profess love for both women, for his incestuous and finally narcissistic sibling substitute as well as for the ideal fiscal match of Isabel's coffee with his sugar, even boasting that many more

the ladies of the house listening for hours about the nefarious effect of slavery when black families are separated and sold off in pieces; the Hegelian slave whose storytelling power over the enchanted mistresses comes from the knowledge gained in the work only she was fit to do. Once her welcome assault on their bedroom frees the novel's narrative flow, the reader may feel an uncomfortable self-doubt in retrospect. Not about the evidently incestuous plot she points to and which begins to unravel from the very beginning of the novel; any one of us can enjoy the self-congratulatory pleasures of getting the point long before the punchline. I mean the self-doubt or self-censure that María de Regla provokes in us readers when she authorizes some information that we may have resisted when it came from a then-questionable source, her husband Dionisio.

In part II, chapter 17, the lonely and bitter man, separated from his wife for twelve years, had crashed a formal dance restricted to free "colored" artisans and had been rebuffed there by Cecilia. Enraged, Dionisio blurted out what we partially know and she suspects: that she and her lover are already too intimately related and that her enslaved nursemaid was banished to the sugar plantation where Gamboa Sr. would be safe from her knowledge; in short, that because of this haughty and thoughtless mulatta who was about to consummate her own disaster, Dionisio and his wife were leading disastrously lonely and humiliating lives. It's not the information that may make us uncomfortable, especially not when it's repeated by a nonthreatening female slave in the conventionally sentimental (s)pace for reading novels; it is rather thinking back on the scene of refusing to know, Cecilia's refusal, that of her admiring companions and, also perhaps, of her readers. Villaverde sets the trap of racially restricted listening by keeping Dionisio anonymous for a while, all the while he remains an aging too-black man, dressed in ill-fitting finery and forcing himself on the Cuban Venus. Borrowing standards of good taste—as well as entire pages—from his society articles for *La Moda* where, arguably, fashion news was meant to customize a particular national style (as in Alberdi's case),²⁵ Villaverde's novel counts on certain assumptions of etiquette that would censure the aggressive outsider for inappropriately coveting the

barely bronzed object of general desire. Surely the free men documented by invitation, and by the narrator's biographical references, are likelier to get her attention. Isn't Cecilia's caution, if not her disdain, understandable? What possible significance could Dionisio's string of insults and recriminations have? She worries about it for a bit, at least until the next dance; and María de Regla reminds the reader to worry too, about why Dionisio, the source of knowledge, the appropriate teller of the story, cannot be appropriately heard. In this novel, as in *Sab*, it is the slaves who know and tell, if the masters will only listen to slaves whose mastery of standard Spanish should itself have been an eloquent promise of social coherence. And by drawing a distinction between blacks who know and whites or mulattoes who refuse to, Cirilo Villaverde cannot confuse himself with an omniscient informant, as Avellaneda had done when she signed Sab's name to the end of her book. Instead, Villaverde's signature appears at the beginning, on the initial title page, via his own initials (and credentials?), C. V., which also can stand for Cecilia Valdés.²⁶ He is Cecilia, deluded like her, unwilling but obliged to divorce desire from destiny, more white than black but, as Leonardo Gamboa remarks about his own privileged color, definitely Cuban in its indefinite origins. "My mother really is a Creole, and I can't vouch for her blood purity" (Villaverde, 38). The confusion doesn't produce a new autochthonous archetype, as it did in *Sab*, but an impossibly precarious hierarchy in which the mulatta's desire to move up coincides tragically with her white lover's taste for slumming. Compared to the bold abolitionist pronouncements of *Sab*, the politics in *Cecilia Valdés* is insidiously subtle, because color coding is shown to be so culturally constituting that the lovers never really unlearn it. Instead one yearns for racial privilege while the other plays on it.

With Villaverde's hindsight, we might assume that the Spanish censors of *Sab* were more concerned than they needed to be about its subversive potential. However, even if the novel wouldn't radically alter centuries of insidious habit, the prose patrol was probably right to fear for a peculiar institution from which slave traders and slaveholders were getting rich. After all, rebellious blacks would be among the most impassioned

freedom fighters of Cuba's Ten Years' War (1868–1878) for independence. The book was stopped at the very dock in Havana as the censors surely worried about its potentially destabilizing effect on the slavocracy.²⁷ That is, the effect produced by seeing a slave invested with the power implied by desire and with the legitimacy that accompanied romantic passion, a combination of forces that took the white elite as its object. His excess of desire always threatens to spill over into a bloody explosion. By contrast, a canonical novel like Brazil's *O Guarani* (1857) by José de Alencar, constructed around a similar erotic investiture of the subaltern class, caused little concern among slavocrats at home. Here the Indian protagonist adores his blond blue-eyed Portuguese mistress. But he adores her as the living image of the Virgin, not as an object of human desire, a passion experienced only by the less ideal characters. Like *Francisco*, this book refuses the radicalizing power of *Sab*, both because the Guarani can feel no self-interest and because Alencar (antiabolitionist that he was) preferred to cast his sublime lovers in racially pure categories (even though the categories were bound to mix in the productive afterlife of his racial romances). *Sab's* enduring charge of radicalism surely owes something to Avellaneda's success in making the racial categories themselves, along with gender assignments, the fragile objects of writing. She destabilizes oppositions from the beginning, by offering us a racially and generically mixed ideal in *Sab*; and she uses that ideal composite of selves to create a mirror effect for the ideal reader of *Sab's* letter; that is for Carlota, Cuba's sensitive, white elite that has been blinded by European esthetic and social habits. *Sab* is already a projection of national consolidation. As such, he goes much farther than simply taking the first denunciatory step in the struggle for blacks' and women's social equality. As a literary construction, who is nevertheless already a familiar type to the Cuban reader, *Sab* crosses over the very terms that constitute(d) the inequality.

I was suggesting above, that this Cuban romance, like others elsewhere, tends to reconcile tensions, and so it differs from populist, anti-imperialist novels of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. These insist on distinct boundaries between self and other, legitimate and illegitimate ownership of national resources. Yet

my suggestion may be a flagrantly Menardian anachronism. I may be reading *Sab* so much like a typical example of the canon that I can overlook a significant variation, one that links this book precisely with the populist novels that would follow. The point is that *Sab* distinguishes clearly between "legitimate" Cuban protagonists, both black and white, and "illegitimate" foreigners, the Otways. Like the first Spaniards who left traces of blood in the caves of Cubitas where *Sab* is the tour guide and Martina the living memory, these Englishmen came to Cuba only to exploit its wealth; that is, to marry her for her money.

Avellaneda's characterization of the Englishmen as social parasites is somewhat surprising in the general historical context of her book. She wrote it during a moment when the leading circle of Cuban abolitionists, who used to meet in Domingo Del Monte's living room, was allying itself with England.²⁸ England, after all, was the world power that did most to abolish the slave trade in those years. Predictably, this alliance made Del Monte's group the object of enmity and repression for Cuba's slaveholding authorities, which included the Creole sugarcocracy and the Spanish merchants and slave traders. But in Spain the resistance to abolition and to England went much farther. It went as far as defending Spanish national or imperial sovereignty. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the English were using the kinds of political and military means to stop the slave trade that actually threatened Spain's stability.²⁹ Needless to say, they also infuriated Cuban sugar growers for whom the Del Monte group was an annoying extension of English power.³⁰

It also seems that English intervention hardly pleased Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. She evidently held out some hope that Cuba could gain freedom without "selling herself" to England. In addition to being just as much a Spanish Liberal as she was a creole abolitionist, Avellaneda had other, more local reasons for belonging only marginally to Del Monte's Anglicized group. In the first place, she was neither from Havana nor from anywhere else in the western part of the island where sugar embittered the lives of far too many slaves. Her social and intellectual world was not polarized between sugar's power and abolitionist resistance. Avellaneda's country was elsewhere; it

was the "Little Cuba" at the margin of plantation society, to the east of Havana and Matanzas.³¹ It is "Cubita," represented time and again in *Sab* (either in the womblike caves associated with Martina or in the garden that Sab planted in the middle of the plantation) as the small world whose master was the legitimate Cuban, the feminized, mulatto, protagonist.

I will not insist that Carlota represents Cuba, or "la Cuba chiquita," with her name beginning and ending like the island's and the depleted dowry that still attracts mercenary lovers (40, 142). But I will suggest that her romance with Enrique Otway parallels the misguided affairs that were bonding some sentimental Cubans to their English "allies" and others to conservative Spaniards. The alliances, Avellaneda is saying, are one-sided. The English, as much as the Spanish slave traders and merchants, are using Cuba for their own purposes. But Cuba is getting nothing in return, nothing, that is, but the useless and unproductive prestige of Old World elegance. A pale and indolent Spain, like Otway, owes its life to the very population that it excludes from its society—not only blacks but also, to some extent, Cuban colonial subjects.

Certainly Avellaneda would not include all Spaniards in her implied criticism. It must not have been easy always to predict who would fit into the "us" and "them" categories of this proto-populist opposition. After all, she herself was a Spaniard both because of her father's family and then largely by choice. She was Cuban more as a matter of sentimental allegiance. As if to dramatize the opportunities for a personal construction of national identity, Avellaneda gives young Otway more than one chance to make the switch from foreign opportunism to national sentiment. Virtue, in the form of passion for the other, tempts him, but not enough to be saved as a New World hero. "Under her power, despite himself, he felt his heart race with an unknown emotion" (88). Enrique *could* have chosen to love Cuba, as Avellaneda had, but his split and finally traditional loyalties make his romantic flight with Carlota miss its liberating mark. Perhaps because of his years, Enrique seems more capable of sincere feeling than does his father; and the youth is almost redeemed through love. As in other romances, a generational difference suggests a possible political and sentimental

gap. In *Amalia* (Argentina, 1851), *Martín Rivas* (Chile, 1862), *Enriquillo* (Dominican Republic, 1882), and *Soledad* (Bolivia, 1847), parents often represent values that their children recognize as anachronistic or un-American. But the tragedy here is that Enrique is finally reconciled to his father. Carlota's lover is unmanned because he short-circuits the Oedipal circle and becomes his father's clone rather than his rival. And Cuba's birth is delayed because clones cannot hope to engender anything new.

The real man here is, of course, Sab, or Avellaneda herself, as passionate as Carlota and as principled and selfless as Teresa. S/he is the more manly, as we said, because s/he is womanly. And s/he is the more Cuban because, as already suggested, in a parallel move away from binary gender terms, Sab's racial and historical character is already so intimate an amalgamation of terms that it has produced a unique, "autochthonous" type.

The novel hints, at least, that continuing intimacy between the already Cubanized sectors would advance the colony's consolidation into a nation. Sab himself represents a product of that intimacy and the ideal harbinger of national authenticity. His desire for Carlota is also a desire for greater national solidarity. It is no revolutionary dream but, as the novel suggests, merely the hope of legitimating a family relationship that is already intimate. The match is less unthinkable than possibly redundant or even incestuous. In that first scene, when Sab meets Otway, he explains that he never knew who his father was; it was a secret that his mother would not reveal. The only thing Sab did know was that his guardian, Don Luis, prepared for death by having a long and secret conversation with his brother, Don Carlos. Since then, Carlota's father has cared for Sab almost like a son (29–30). A conversation between Enrique and Carlota corroborates the insinuation of family relationship, although for some reason Sab doesn't seem to have gotten the point (52). In any case, since Sab and Carlota are probably cousins, the intimacy of possible "incest" at this safe remove might have provided an ideal family consolidation in the nation-building project. Incest here is not the unproductive dead-end of love, as it would become with the threat of sibling incest in pessimistic novels like *Cecilia Valdés*, *Aves sin nido* (Peru, 1889), and even

One Hundred Years of Solitude (Colombia, 1967). Rather it was proof that Cubans had been loving Cubans productively for a long time. For pre-independentists like Avellaneda, Sab is no warning against some unnatural and secret passion. It is an opportunity for consolidation.

This kind of cousin-to-cousin love is the norm in many of the foundational novels that followed, as for example in *Solidad*, *María* (Colombia, 1867), *Amalia* (at another remove), *Enriquillo*, and *Doña Bárbara*. In this nation-building scheme that depended on marrying powerful and conflicting interests to each other, the possible match between Sab and Teresa is doomed from the beginning. Even if Sab had overcome his own self-limiting ideal of love and responded to the warmth he inspired in Teresa, their union would not have delivered the kind of hegemonizing stability that Carlota's recognition could promise. Teresa's history does not intersect with Sab's; instead it runs parallel. She is as illegitimate and economically dependent as is the slave (36). Whereas Carlota could have supplemented Sab's generic Cubanness and prudent industriousness with the aura of a broadly acknowledged legitimacy, Teresa could only encourage him to turn his back on Cuba: "Leave these lands, leave them and search for another sky" (159). She would have fixed him in another, ghettoized terrain, somewhere beyond a potentially amalgamated redefinition of the nation.

Read backward from the self-defeating racism that lingers in *Cecilia Valdés*, Avellaneda's knowing promise of a coherent Cuba may seem partial or strained, based on partial knowledge and straining with more will than conviction. Avellaneda has Teresa offer herself to Sab, but never really to tempt him; nor can his freedom to leave Cuba solve anything at home. These narrative dead-ends, along with Sab's preference for self-sacrifice over struggle, all point to an ideological pause in the novel's motivation. Despite the space that Sab and Avellaneda manage to liberate inside the discourse that traps them, as writers they are bound together by the classic double-bind. In the first place, Sab and Gertrudis continue to be united in their admiration for a schematic heroine whose adorable qualities themselves, her innocence and naiveté, keep her from recogniz-

ing Sab's worth. Carlota begins to love him only after she is no longer really Carlota anymore, but the embittered and disillusioned Mrs. Otway. The romantic affair that should have liberated Sab seals his tragic fate. The very language that channels his feelings makes sure that those feelings will be absent to his ideal reader until it is too late. In the second place, Sab also refuses to love himself through his textual double, Teresa. He refuses because he aspires to the recognition of his mistress, because he does not want to break with the binary generic categories of ideal romantic love. Carlota is not only his childhood playmate and the object of his incestuous fantasies; she is also the incarnation of an ideal and uncontaminated sign. Her name is woman.

But for Sab or Teresa there are no names adequate enough to make them feel legitimate. There are no new categories in the language of a slave society. Neither Sab nor Avellaneda coin any. Could this be because of some irreparable breach in their language? Or is it because of Avellaneda's fear of falling into excessive verbal violence, the same horror that Teresa had of Sab's fantasies of revenge?

He pensado también en armar contra nuestros opresores los brazos encadenados de sus víctimas; arrojar en medio de ellos el terrible grito de libertad y venganza; bañarme en sangre de blancos. (147)

[I too have thought about arming our chained and victimized bodies against our oppressors; of casting among them the terrible cry of liberty and revenge; of bathing in the blood of white men.]

No doubt Avellaneda preferred not to follow Hugo's lead in making his black hero a leader of the slave rebellion in Haiti; she rather chose to imagine the possibility of a peaceful and legitimate marriage of signs inside the existing order of things. Avellaneda must have felt safer about writing the old works in new combinations so that they would only look incoherent, because the idea of inventing new and revolutionary names evidently seemed more violent than constructive.