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A Legacy to the World: Race and Gender in *Sab*

Just as Blacks did in the master-slave relationships [...], women in patriarchy have traditionally cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to gain freedom to live their lives on their own terms, if only in the privacy of their own thoughts¹.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's first novel *Sab* (1841) has been subject to many different interpretations. Although many critics consider *Sab* an abolitionist novel, not all agree that this was the author's main purpose². Others have considered it as little more than a sentimental and shocking romantic story of the impossibly unconventional love of a black slave for a white woman³. *Sab* could be seen as a particularly noteworthy example of anti-slavery literature that ranks with the work of other unquestionably anti-slavery contemporary Cuban writers (Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiography* (1838), Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco: El ingenio* (1839, published in 1880) and Antonio Zambrana's *El negro Francisco* (1875). It could be argued that none of these abolitionist works quite reach *Sab*'s

¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 74.

² See Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. *Conferencias pronunciadas en la Fundación Universitaria Española*, ed. by Carmen Bravo-Villasante, Gastón Baquero y J. A. Escarpanter (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria, 1974), p. 15. See also Mary Cruz, Prologue to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab* (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1973); Carmen Bravo-Villasante, Prologue to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab* (Salamanca: Anaya, 1970); Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *La Avellaneda y sus obras. Ensayo biográfico y crítico* (Madrid: Tipografía de Archivos, 1930); Helena Percas Poseti, "Avellaneda y su novela *Sab*", *Revista Iberoamericana*, 38 (1962), 347–57; Concepción T. Alzola, "El personaje Sab", in *Homenaje a Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. Memorias del simposio en el centenario de su muerte*, ed. by Rosa M. Cabrera and Gladys B. Zaldívar (Miami: Universal, 1981), pp. 283–91; Stacey Schlauf, "A Stranger in a Strange Land: The Discourse of Alienation in Gómez de Avellaneda's Abolitionist *Sab*", *Hispania* (Cincinnati), 69 (1986), 495–503; Pedro Barreda Tomás, "Abolicionismo y feminismo en la Avellaneda: lo negro como artificio narrativo en *Sab*", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, CXII–CXIV (1978), 613–26; Lucía Guerra, "Estrategias femeninas en la elaboración del sujeto romántico en la obra de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda", *Revista Iberoamericana*, 51 (1985), 707–716; Joan Torres-Pou, "La ambigüedad del mensaje feminista de *Sab* de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda", *Letras Femeninas*, 19 (1993), 55–64; Mayuli Morales Faedo, "*Sab*: la subversión ideológica del discurso femenino en la novela cubana del siglo XIX", *Revista de Literatura Hispanoamericana*, 31 (1995), 51–60; Nara Araújo, "Raza y género en *Sab* o el juego de espejos", *El alfiler y la mariposa* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1997), pp. 39–49; Brígida Pastor, "Symbiosis Between Slavery and Feminism in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*?", *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 16 (1997), 187–96.

³ Mary Cruz, Prologue to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab* (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1973), p. 120. It should be noted, however, that in a later article the same writer does treat the abolitionist theme in the novel. See her article "*Sab*, vigorosa protesta contra toda servidumbre", *El caimán barbudo*, 60 (1972), 12–15.

level of condemnation: the novel's condemnation of the shackles placed on both Blacks and women by society: "Sab's description of women's helpless lived burial under the marriage bond evokes as much horror as his earlier account of the slaves' condition of endless toil"⁴. Although Susan Kirkpatrick in 1989 has correctly, in my view, noticed that in *Sab*, Avellaneda's feminism rather eclipses her denunciation of slavery,⁵ she does not seem to offer an exclusively feminist reading of the novel. She asserts that the theme of slavery is a disguised form of feminist protest, but she remarks on the fact that Avellaneda found it easier to express her abolitionist feelings, implicitly suggesting that the novel also had an abolitionist intention⁶. Evelyn Picón Garfield, too, elaborates a convincing analysis of *Sab* as a novel from which different discourses of marginality emerge, such as race, gender, social and geographical isolation and political exclusion. Furthermore, from her gender-oriented study, she concludes that Avellaneda's own marginality allowed her to produce a unique anti-slavery novel that was textually distinct from other anti-slavery narratives written by male authors⁷.

In summary, although some gender-oriented studies have noted that Avellaneda's feminism overshadows her denunciation of slavery, others have declared that the feminist concerns were subordinate to, or disguised by, a more overt preoccupation with slavery. Or in Nina M. Scott's words, all these gender-oriented critics seem, by and large, to coincide in considering that Avellaneda used the slave Sab, "not only to protest slavery, but to vent many of her own particular frustrations".⁸ I agree with Nara Araújo's evaluation of *Sab*, that the slave Sab emerges as a mirror of woman's consciousness rather than a complementary character; thus, in her own words: "La dinámica raza-género es paradigmática en esta novela, precisamente, por la mutua complementariedad"⁹.

My aim in this article is to demonstrate that Avellaneda's feminist concern is an integral part of the novel at every level, from that of the characterisation to the plot and stylistic expression. I will argue not that Avellaneda's purpose is to disguise her feminist views under the pretext of an abolitionist novel, but that she resorts to the anti-slavery theme to establish an analogy between the position of women and slaves, thus highlighting her feminist concern, which is repeated and treated more explicitly in her other early novel *Dos mujeres*. *Sab* arises from the need of women

⁴ See Jill A. Netchinsky, "Engendering a Cuban Literature: Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Narrative (Manzano, Suárez y Romero, Gómez de Avellaneda, A. Zambrana)" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 1986), p. 248.

⁵ Susan Kirkpatrick, *Las románticas. Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, 1835-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 156.

⁶ Kirkpatrick, p. 283.

⁷ See Evelyn Picón Garfield, *Poder y sexualidad: el discurso de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda* (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), p. 54.

⁸ Nina M. Scott, "Introduction" to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography*, trans. by Nina M. Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. xxv.

⁹ Nara Araújo, "Raza y género en *Sab* o el juego de espejos", *El alfiler y la mariposa* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1997), pp. 39-49 (p. 45).

to express their feminine identities within the prevailing social structures. Avellaneda's later works confirm the depth of her commitment to justice and freedom, explaining why she had to use a variety of strategies to survive in a society that condemned those who dared to transgress its norms. In *Sab*, the contemporary problem of slavery allowed the author also to affirm the rights of women and her desire for social equality.¹⁰ But I hope to show that Avellaneda's powerful portrayal of her "feminised" male slave Sab and of her female characters constitutes an even greater form of rebellion, in that they constitute authentic feminine voices, who in one way or another articulate the problematic relationship between the sexes in a patriarchal society.

From early age, Avellaneda had clashed with the conventional ambiance of her time and had become conscious of the marginal role of women within the oppressive patriarchal system. As a result, she had come to equate the situation of black slaves with women as both are on the margins of society and culture. In my view, *Sab* constitutes a discourse of hybrid marginality which links the social position and condition of woman with the representation of the "other", represented by the slave. The similarity that Avellaneda clearly sees between slaves and women is exploited in her portrayal of the mulatto slave Sab. His marginal position (like women's) means that he is not a "patriarchal" man, and so, like the female voice in Avellaneda's autobiographical letters, he can articulate the "other" of male self-identity. As Araújo points out: "La otredad compartida por los «no blancos» y la mujer, como sujetos *diferentes*, el paralelismo entre la retórica de la opresión sexual y la opresión racial, conforman la dinámica raza-género"¹¹. Avellaneda is clearly working within the terms of a language which has been defined as phallogentric, while posing questions about patriarchal organization and generating subtexts through a disguised semantic and somatic language.

The slave Sab is a highly feminized figure: as a man he possesses a masculine identity, but as a slave, he identifies himself with and is identified with woman in culture. In addition, his position as a slave prevents him from coming to terms with his masculinity, both as a man and as a slave. This results in an ambiguously gendered character who addresses eloquently, but indirectly, the male/female conflict in patriarchal culture. I hope to show that Avellaneda attempts to expose patriarchal culture's failure to give equal value to the feminine and the masculine, indicating how this is a fundamental flaw in society's cultural life.

Although *Sab* and *Autobiografía y cartas* share femininity as their main theme, Kirkpatrick has observed: "The notes of protest and denunciation sounded in

¹⁰ Picón Garfield, citing Russet, explains the basis of the scientific ideology which relegates blacks and women to a second rank: "Los científicos llegaron a ser los profetas que concedieron el estado de madurez revolucionaria al blanco, al civilizado, al europeo y al hombre, mientras a 'los otros'—la gente de color, el primitivo y la mujer—los relegaron a un estado infantil perpetuo" (p. 62). [See Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1989)].

¹¹ Araújo, p. 40.

Sab add to Avellaneda's representation of female subjectivity an element that was [...] repressed in the autobiography"¹². Avellaneda identifies with the slave because their respective destinies "no [les] [abrían] ninguna senda, [y] [...] el mundo no [les] concedía ningún derecho"¹³: Colour, for slaves, and gender, for women, "[eran] el sello de una fatalidad eterna, una sentencia de muerte moral" (p. 312). A close reading of Avellaneda's autobiographical texts helps the reader to understand the link she saw between woman and slave. Avellaneda confesses in a letter published in *El Arlequín*: "soy huérfana [...] soy sola en el mundo"¹⁴. This statement echoes Sab's words: "Yo no tengo padre ni madre... soy solo en el mundo; nadie llorará mi muerte" (257). These words underline the way in which the equation between woman and slave throughout the novel has a purpose—the construction of the female voice. In Avellaneda's *Autobiografía y cartas*, we see that Avellaneda constructs herself as a feminine voice to seduce her male beloved, resulting in the contradictions and conflicts generated by the desire to voice her female identity in the context of a patriarchal culture. It is precisely these tensions and conflicts which emerge in *Sab* as a result of the unrequited love between Sab/Carlota and Enrique/Teresa.

Sab was written at the same time as other anti-slavery novels such as Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1839), Félix Tanco's *El niño Fernando* (1838) and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco* (1838), all of which also have passion as the central theme. In all these works a white man loves a black or mulatto woman.¹⁵ Avellaneda transgresses the tradition of these authors, not only by being the only woman to write a novel of this kind during the period, but also because she reverses the relationship in order to serve her feminist purpose. A "black" man (he is actually mulatto), Sab, dares to desire a white woman, Carlota. Thus, Avellaneda tries to create a double impact on her audience by presenting a social inversion that breaks the existing social and literary canons and by using this unusual relationship to promote a feminist message. Furthermore, in *Sab*, Avellaneda offers a more sophisticated

¹² Kirkpatrick, p. 147.

¹³ Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab*. Prologue by Mary Cruz (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1973), p. 132. All the quotations of *Sab* are from this edition.

¹⁴ Mentioned by Carmen Bravo-Villasante, *Una vida romántica: La Avellaneda* (Barcelona: EDHASA, 1967), p. 105.

¹⁵ Cruz, Prologue to *Sab*, p. 35. The publication of controversial novels was not possible in Cuba. Two generations of antislavery novels can be distinguished. The first ones were written around 1838, but not published then, and the last, *Cecilia Valdés*, appeared in 1882. *Francisco* is considered the first anti-slavery text in Spanish America, although not published at the time, it had circulated as a manuscript since 1838 [See Iván A. Schulman, "The Portrait of the Slave: Ideology and Aesthetics in the Cuban Antislavery Novel", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292 (1977), 356–67 (p. 365)]. Scott notes that "Avellaneda had the advantage of being in Spain and living under the generally liberal government of the Regent, Queen Mary Cristina; publication of an anti-slavery work was possible in Spain, as opposed to Cuba" (p. XXI).

linguistic approach by articulating openly the female "other" of the otherwise black slave-oriented male discourse.

At the time of writing *Sab*, Avellaneda had immersed herself in the works of liberal thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu and others. The figure of Sab owes a great deal to the literary type of the noble savage, who was used in these writings to criticize the injustices of more highly developed societies. Such writers believed that earlier, more primitive societies permitted humans to live together in harmony. Sab - given an image similar to that of the noble savage - also serves to advance Avellaneda's critique of society, as the idealization of Sab reveals him to be different from the average slave. However, as Araújo very convincingly argues: "La diferencia en la novela de la escritora reside en la *diferencia* con la cual se homologan los personajes que encarnan la raza y el género, con lo que la cubana se distancia del modelo maestro"¹⁶. Despite the similarities between Sab and the noble savage of the European liberal literature (he is noble, royal and learned), Sab's social position and colour makes him different. Sab does not reflect the stereotypical image of the slave, for Avellaneda makes him a spokesman denouncing the injustice inherent in the position not only of slaves, but also, indirectly, of women in society. Blacks (like women), "[están] condenados a ver hombres [...] para los cuales la fortuna y la ambición abren mil caminos de gloria y de poder; mientras que ellos [ellas?] no pueden tener ambición, no pueden esperar un porvenir" (p. 258). It is noteworthy that the mulatto slave in *Sab* only expresses his anger, feelings and ambitions, in other words, his own identity, when he is in dialogue with a woman, in the private medium of the letter, or in his silenced inner thoughts, just as the issue of women's equality was hardly addressed in public. Although the narrative voice has the last word in each chapter, Sab's voice is the major one throughout the novel, allowing him to establish a powerful and alternative discourse that challenges the dominant male discourse.

The novel presents a picture of life in central Cuba where Avellaneda spent her childhood and adolescence, in the 1820s. We find the family of Don Carlos de B..., a Cuban landowner who has a young, romantic daughter, Carlota. Sab, a slave who is protected by the family, is the illegitimate son of Don Carlos' brother. Teresa, an illegitimate orphan, is Carlota's cousin and is brought up by her family. Carlota is pursued by Enrique Otway, son of Jorge Otway, a greedy English merchant. Enrique believes Carlota to be very rich and asks for her hand, but when he learns that she has lost her fortune, is encouraged by his father to break his promise. Sab learns that Teresa loves Enrique and secretly, but hopelessly in love with Carlota, the slave follows developments carefully. He wins money in a lottery and offers it to Teresa so that she can gain Enrique's love, but Teresa renounces the money out of gratitude to the family who had cared for her. Teresa makes Sab pretend that Carlota has won the money in order that she may have a dowry and thus marry Enri-

¹⁶ Araújo, p. 42. For an interesting comparative study on the typology of the noble savage, see Araújo's, *Visión romántica del otro. Estudio comparativo de Atala y Cumandá Bug-Jarcal y Sab* (La Habana: Colección Ache, 1993).

que, which she does. That same day, Sab dies and Teresa enters a convent. Carlota continues to believe that Enrique has married her out of love, but soon discovers that this is not the case and that her father-in-law dominates both their lives. At the conclusion of the novel, Teresa dies and, on her deathbed, she tells Carlota of Sab's sacrifice for her and gives Carlota a letter which Sab had written before his death. In this he confesses his eternal love for Carlota and equates her destiny as a woman in marriage with that of black slaves. The pain of the daily visits to Teresa at the Convent of the Ursulines helps Carlota to mature. Although she is very unhappy with her lot as wife and daughter-in-law, she finally realises that the slave had been superior to the master. In the end, we are unsure of Carlota's fate, although there is a possibility that she has gone to Europe with her husband, disappearing into oblivion.

Sab's Race: The Enslaved Feminine

I hope to demonstrate that throughout the novel, Sab undergoes an inner development which enables him to create an identity that depends on a balanced relationship between the masculine and the feminine.¹⁷ This growth process must begin from the real position in which he finds himself—that is, from within the narrow confines of his role as a slave in society. The process consists of him being able to articulate his "other" (feminine) pole of identity, which is censored in culture, and which if repressed prevents him from fulfilling the wholeness of which he is capable. As we shall see later, Sab's creation of this "other" (female) discourse is strengthened by his interactions with the female figures of the novel. These key relationships show him coming face to face (and to terms) with the negative projections that the (male) cultural imaginary imposes on the women with whom he identifies as a slave.

Sab is not an ordinary slave, being of royal blood on his mother's side. When his mother is stolen from her homeland and brought as a slave to Cuba, she falls in love with a son of the plantation owner. Sab is thus linked on his father's side to the land-owning ruling class of the island, but because of the status of his mother, he is excluded from their company and is destined to be a slave. Unlike the male imaginary that normally covers up its maternal origins, Sab is at pains to reveal both the paternal and maternal sides of his descent, allowing him indirectly to give prominence to what is usually hidden - the feminine. As we shall see in the description of Sab, the narrative voice, in accordance with contemporary gender theories, equates lack or flaw with the feminine, that which is usually excluded from male discourse, but which is necessary to create a whole (and wholesome), image, that embraces both light and dark, both masculine and feminine. To do this, the narrative portrays Sab as having an unusual combination of characteristics - not perfectly white nor perfectly black, not all masculine nor all feminine - but rather a very human mixture

¹⁷ Mary Cruz in her article "¿Por qué Sab?" explores several possible interpretations of why Avellaneda chose the name Sab. Among those she considers, I find one particularly appropriate for my interpretation of Sab. That is that she suggests that the name Sab could derive from the Phrygian god Sabazios who was identified by the Greeks with their god Dionysos (a god associated with the feminine principle) [*Gaceta de Cuba*, 83 (1970), 9–10 (p. 10)].

of black and white, African and European, and crucially, masculine and feminine. His face is a singular amalgam of the features of the African (black) and the European races (white), yet "without being a perfect mulatto", a description which itself attempts to subvert patriarchal values, with their emphasis on perfection:

No parecía un criollo blanco, tampoco era negro ni podía creérsele descendiente de los primeros habitantes de las Antillas. Su rostro presentaba un compuesto singular en que se descubría el cruzamiento de dos razas diversas, y en que se amalgamaban, por decirlo así, los rasgos de la casta africana con los de la europea, sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto (p. 133) [my emphasis].

Sab's colour is described as "blanco amarillento con cierto fondo oscuro", indicating a mixture of colours which combine the dominant masculine principle (white/yellow) and the feminine/ unconscious symbolized by "oscuro" (black) (p. 133); his hair is "negro y lustroso", like that of a powerful and dignified male in society, but his hair is also described "con mechones desiguales [...] como las alas del cuervo"¹⁸, suggesting potential mobility and a capacity for personal evolution (p. 133). His nose has the "aguileña" appearance of the dominant male, in contrast to the more feminine aspect of his thick, purple lips which "denotaban su procedencia africana"—his maternal origins (p. 133). This conjunction of symbols illustrates how the masculine and feminine principles are encapsulated in Sab and depict his ambiguous, yet whole and balanced personality. The concluding words of the passage about Sab ("sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto") indirectly suggest that the concept of human perfection is a distortion of reality by the one-sided male imaginary. This ironic stance of the narrator challenges the way in which the male imaginary is able to entertain extreme (either-or) notions of perfection (either all white or all male), but is unable to embrace a healthy mixture of white and black, of *both* male *and* female.

The ambiguity of Sab's portrayal, together with the difficulty of assigning him to a definite racial category, is underlined by the fact that he is not a proprietor, nor is he an average slave; he is assigned the role of a "mayoral" ("a chief administrator who directs or presides over the slaves"), a function rarely carried out by a slave.¹⁹ Sab is different from the other slaves in birth, appearance, education and behaviour. Torn between two social realities, Sab belongs to neither: he is not a slave like the others, but neither is he integrated into white society. He is, like women, on the margin and isolated from society ("sólo en el mundo") (p. 257). Sab is caught between a slavery imposed by the symbolic order and his own autonomous identity,

¹⁸ Cf. J. E. Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 374 and 70: "since wings also signify mobility, this meaning combines with that of enlightenment to express the possibility of 'progress in enlightenment' or spiritual evolution"; the crow, because of its black colour, "is associated with the idea of beginning (as expressed in such symbols as the maternal night, primogenital darkness, the fertilizing earth)".

¹⁹ Scott, p. 151.

in an (implicitly female) position of subordination, lacking power and voice. As residues undermined by the dominant symbolic order ("nadie llorará mi muerte"), the only destiny Sab (and women) can aspire to is "anda[r] mientras puede y [echarse] en tierra cuando ya no puede más" (p. 257).

During his first encounter with Enrique (his male opponent), Sab tells Enrique how he was brought up and educated with Carlota, from whom he acquired a love of books and refined thinking that separate him from the other slaves. As he says: "fuí *compañero* de sus juegos y estudios [...] su inocente corazón *no medía la distancia* que nos separaba y me concedía el cariño de un hermano" (p. 139) [my emphasis]. In describing his relationship with Carlota, Sab emphasises the culturally determined "difference" between him (as a man/slave) and Carlota (as a woman/master), by indicating how they saw each other as equals ("compañero[s]") (p. 139). Furthermore, by stating that Carlota "no medía la distancia" between them, Sab attempts indirectly to counteract the one-sidedness of male imaginary, according to which everything and everyone must be "measured up". In Irigarayan terms, one could say that Sab's depiction of Carlota establishes how he wishes to propose an alternative, more female, mode of seeing the world.

The stylistic features of Sab's discourse which allow him to express a balanced and harmonious identity are highlighted by the admiration and curiosity which Enrique feels for Sab's language and eloquence on their first meeting:

[Sab] parecía revelar algo de grande y noble que llamaba la atención, y lo que acababa de oírle el extranjero [Enrique], en un lenguaje y una expresión que no correspondían a la clase que denotaba su traje pertenecer, acrecentó su admiración y curiosidad (p. 136) [my emphasis].

Thus, Sab transcends the restrictions of his socio-cultural position, just as Avellaneda (and Irigaray) urge woman to do and his discourse not only draws the reader's attention to his distinctive voice, but also accords him the most authoritative voice of the novel

During his conversation with Enrique, Sab evokes the memory of his dead mother who was born "libre y princesa", but was a victim of the trade in black slaves, alluding implicitly to those (white men) who trade women as objects in society ("los traficantes de carne humana"). By invoking with admiration the autonomous and sovereign status of his mother, Sab provides himself with a mirror in which he can see himself as empowered and equal to his competitor:

Mi madre vino al mundo en un país donde su color no era un signo de esclavitud, [...] nació libre y princesa [...]. Bien lo saben todos aquellos que fueron, como ella, conducidos de las costas del Congo por los traficantes de carne humana (p. 138).

By tracing his background firmly to his maternal origins, Sab underlines how his relationship with his mother is a symbol of a lost freedom in a feminine context. He emphasises his mother's rightful superior status ("libre y princesa"), indirectly suggesting his sense that his mother is a divine amalgam of royal and human, ena-

bling her to be free and sovereign in Irigarayan terms²⁰. In addition, by showing how Sab traces his lineage both to his mother and to Mother Africa, this passage anticipates the connection drawn between female genealogy and primitive origins.

As soon as Sab articulates his deprived social status as a slave, the balance of the conversation is disrupted. Enrique's tone toward Sab becomes superior and contemptuous and, on hearing that Enrique is Carlota's fiancée, Sab experiences a change in his psychological stability - the harmonious balance in him between the two existential poles is disturbed: "se verificó en el alma del esclavo un incomprendible trastorno" (p. 140). This moment of conflict marks the beginning of the confrontation between the masculine and the feminine in him. The resulting tension leads Sab to resort to a discourse that challenges the repressive tone of his male interlocutor and which attempts to re-affirm his identity. Thus he chooses to reject freedom because of his wish to stay by Carlota: "Desde mi infancia fui escriturado a la señorita Carlota: soy esclavo suyo, y *quiero vivir y morir* a su servicio", blurring sexual identity and gender roles (p. 140) [my emphasis]. The key word in the above passage, "escriturado", suggests that Sab strategically appropriates for him/herself the (male) action of writing and offers himself as it were a slave to Carlota (woman). One could here translate "escriturado" (formalised legally in writing) as "inscribed". Thus, as it were, in a specifically Irigarayan way, Sab sees himself as being a "slave" in a deeper sense than the merely legal. He seems to reject rebellion because he is doubly enslaved, both literally to his (female) master, and metaphorically, by his feelings for Carlota, the "other". Although, his feelings cannot be requited due to external cultural factors such as race and class, at least he is the slave of his own desires. Although Sab also gives voice to his desire to be free, he is aware that his colour (like a woman's sex) makes him inherently a slave in an unjust society: "sin duda es dulce la libertad... Pero yo nací esclavo: era esclavo desde el vientre de mi madre" (p. 140). Here, Sab alludes to the condition of the slave (woman) in culture, where they have no real autonomy (and certainly no voice of their own).

Furthermore, as a loyal servant, it is possible that he is not mentally equipped for rebellion, as he has identified with the ruling class (slave-owners) and their values, just as the women of that class were unable to break from their subordination. In addition, his rejection of freedom in order to stay by Carlota represents a typically feminine option of choosing love over independence. Therefore, in some ways, his enslavement to Carlota could also be interpreted as a kind of solidarity or fidelity to the feminine line represented by Carlota.

As the novel progresses, Sab's sense of enslavement is given fuller articulation via his identification with the female figures, which are mirror images of his own inner sense of self. In the first example of this, there can be little doubt that his relationship with his dead mother is projected on to the indigenous woman, "la vieja india Martina" (p. 210). He admires and respects Martina, as if she was his real

²⁰ See Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women", *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 62.

mother and indeed he is Martina's "hijo adoptivo" (p. 215). The resulting mother-son relationship is emphasized by Sab's words: "sed mi madre, admitidme por vuestro hijo" (p. 215). Similarly, Martina recognizes and validates Sab, by praising his heroic actions in risking his life to save her grandson when their house burned down: "Sab, querido Sab, por qué quieres privar a tu madre del placer de bendecirte" (p. 217). This is a relationship between equals, reciprocal and beneficial to both. Sab identifies with Martina, not only because he shares her position on the margins of society, but also because a bond is created by their shared oppression (as slave and indigenous woman respectively). Special rhetorical emphasis is placed on her race by the narrative voice addressing her as "india" followed by the bracketed comment: "pues no pretendemos disputarla este nombre" (p. 212).

Martina is portrayed as a wise woman who seems to have gained "grande experiencia" through a life painfully lived and her acquired strong ego-identity has enabled her to bravely challenge her position in an oppressive society (p. 202). A number of words in this passage seem to symbolize how this female figure has undergone a significant process of growth and become a fully developed woman with a strong sense of self. She equates herself with an "árbol viejo del monte [que] resiste a los huracanes y a las lluvias, a los rigores del sol" (p. 211). This depicts her as a growing and regenerating organism which stands secure in a prominent position in the face of violent repression by the patriarchal codes suggested by "huracanes", "lluvias" and "rigores del sol". The identification of Martina with the height of an "old tree"/"mountain" highlights her inner "magnificence" of spirit or robust ego-identity and indicates how successful she has been in achieving a sense of her own female identity in culture. Martina's wisdom and autonomy make her a whole-divine woman in feminist terms. That Sab recognizes the goddess in her is revealed by his reverential attitude to her: "Sab se arrodilló a [sus] pies" (p. 215). Kneeling, or other similar actions, is used throughout the novel by the feminine characters, including Sab, to symbolize the recognition of the divine in women²¹.

One of the most striking techniques that is used in the depiction of the female (or feminized) characters to illustrate their female selves is the frequent use of the body to express their (female) thoughts and feelings. As we saw in the narrator's description of Sab, the physical description of Martina inscribes her (female) identity in both feminine and masculine terms, revealing a physical balance that parallels her wholeness of personality. Despite her age, her hair is "de un negro perfecto", balancing the half-bald part of her head. While Martina's disposition to (male) baldness may appear to undermine her truly female identity, it also suggests a graceful acceptance of her ageing process, regardless of the offence that it constitutes to the male image of femininity. Her small or sunken mouth ("pequeña y hundida que apenas se le veía") seems to be enclosed ("encerrada") by both the phallic shape of her long

²¹ For further references see pp. 171, 215, 240, 244, 355, 257, 263, 281, 285, 307, 319.

and thin nose ("nariz larga y delgada") and her protuberant chin ("barba que avanzaba hacia afuera") (p. 210). These references to how the female characteristics of her face are hidden symbolise Martina's repression by patriarchal misogyny. Yet when viewed as a whole figure, "la estatura de esta mujer era colosal en su sexo", and in spite of her age and emaciation, "manteníase tan derecha y erguida como una palma" (p. 210). This description suggests that she has been successful in overcoming patriarchal constraints and that she has achieved full development towards her divine status, bearing "con una especie de orgullo [su] semblante superlativamente feo" (p. 211). Thus she is "inscribed" more authoritatively in patriarchal culture, achieving a distinctive female identity, that combines both witch-like "loca" (the negative) and goddess (the positive) (p. 201). The balanced wholeness of Martina's character helps us to understand Sab's harmonious identity and his personal evolution, as she has influenced and strengthened Sab's subjectivity throughout his life. Furthermore, Martina's role in Sab's life will inform the bond of friendship and solidarity he establishes with another female character Teresa.

When Sab's sense of inner balance is disrupted by the appearance of Enrique (the love object of Teresa and the obstacle to Sab's attainment of his love), it is restored by Teresa. Sab, the orphan slave, and Teresa, the orphan without a dowry, are both victims of the nineteenth-century social structure and occupy equally disadvantageous positions. The narrative voice introduces the developing and interweaving relationship between Sab and Teresa through an eloquently symbolic description of a beautiful night in the Tropics: "El firmamento relucía recamado de estrellas" (p. 239). By an effect of embroidering ("recamar") the stars (feminine in gender) on the firmamento (masculine in gender) an Irigarayan "amorous exchange" seems to be established between the "firmamento" and "estrellas"²². Thus, the relationship between Sab (or firmament) and Teresa (or star) is depicted metaphorically as transcending the limits of a simple friendship and achieving reciprocal acknowledgement and admiration. Their thoughts and feelings appear to mirror each other's: "Ambos se miraron y ambos se estremecieron, porque como en un espejo había visto cada uno en la mirada del otro la dolorosa pasión que en aquel momento le dominaba" (p. 190). During a later meeting half-way through the novel, Teresa identifies closely with Sab's words when he speaks of his condition as a slave and of his lack of freedom. The understanding between them seems to develop without the use of words; by recognising each other's feelings, they implicitly give equal value to *both* the masculine (Sab) *and* the feminine (Teresa): "al mismo tiempo dos individuos que mutuamente se reconocían" (p. 240).

²² Irigaray points out that the grammatical gender of nouns reflects values applied generally to gender roles in culture. Avellaneda, like Irigaray, seems to be drawing to the reader's attention that the gender imperatives imposed by a culture on men and women are reflected, albeit inconsistently, in the language, and that just as gender-related modes of behaviour can be freed from such limitations, so, too, can the language in which they find form.

Although both of them suffer in silence and resignation, Sab's uncontrolled unhappiness leads him to try to and prevent the marriage between Carlota and the egotistic Enrique. Being aware of the financial difficulties of Carlota's family and Enrique's intentions to seek a better settlement, he proposes to Teresa that she take the money he has won in a lottery, so that Enrique will want to marry her. At this point, Sab and Teresa begin to understand the other's lack of a confident ego-identity, and how Sab's condition as a "miserable esclavo" and Teresa's position as commodity of no value on the marriage market put them in a similar position: "ambos somos huérfanos y desgraciados... aislados estamos los dos sobre la tierra" (pp. 250, 258). Sab shares with Teresa the feelings he has for Carlota, and the impossibility of fulfilling them because he is "vástago de una raza envilecida" (p. 243). As a gesture of solidarity with him, Teresa "alargó su mano a Sab, con alguna emoción", underlining how the sense of touch²³ can be a particularly feminine way of expressing innermost feelings (p. 243).

When Sab refers to his impossible union with Carlota, he claims that his and Carlota's destiny would have been different had they been born "en los abrasados desiertos de África o en un confín desconocido de la América" (p. 204). This quotation carries an implicit critique of the oppressive values of white patriarchal society, since "los abrasados desiertos de África" and "un confín desconocido de la América" represent free and immaculate places, far from the materialistic (patriarchal) society, in which individuals are limited in their process of growth. Thus, Sab in his role of "female" speaking subject offers a vision of a hypothetical and harmonious past, in which slaves (and women) were able to free in themselves from the social yoke and express their own subjectivity.

Like Teresa and the other female characters in the novel (such as Carlota and Martina), Sab alludes frequently to his bond with the female realm of Nature as the universal mother of blacks *and* whites, of women *and* men²⁴, a powerful, female realm which is antithetical to the injustices of male society:

Pero la sociedad de los hombres no ha imitado la equidad de la madre común, que en vano les ha dicho: Sois hermanos. ¡Imbécil sociedad, que nos ha reducido a la necesidad de aborrecerla, y fundar nuestra dicha en su total ruina! (p. 243).

²³ Note the prevalence in this episode of terms referring to the sense of touch (between Sab and Teresa) as being essential for their process of maturation: "Teresa alargó su mano a Sab" (p. 243); "tendió ella sus dos manos" (p. 258); "estrechando sus manos contra su pecho", "tornando a besar sus manos" (p. 259); "inclinada sobre él", "sosteniéndole la cabeza sobre sus rodillas" (p. 262).

²⁴ This view of Nature is that exemplified in Irigaray's commentary on Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, where Nature is used to symbolise woman or the other, who is to be mastered and dominated (Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine* London; New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 44).

Patriarchy ("la sociedad de los hombres") masks an act of dispossession that broke a connection with the natural universe ("la equidad de la madre común"), in which both women (slaves) and men were, as "hermanos" and potentially divine, linked in justice and freedom. The last line of the paragraph suggests that patriarchy has taken "the divine" away from women (and from slaves), and Sab's voice locates the space where patriarchal culture's view of women (and slaves) is at odds with the natural law. He attempts to restore the universal harmony and balance that is the mark of Mother Nature. As a result of their repressed position, slaves and women imagine that they can only be free in a long-gone Utopian natural world, or in the next world. Their dreams of such a Utopian world are also an attempt to be present at the birth of a new social order, in which both master and slave can be recognized as equals and can cohabit harmoniously:

[A]quella otra vida [...] donde hay igualdad y justicia y donde las almas que en la tierra fueron separadas por los hombres, se reunirán en el seno de Dios por toda la eternidad (p. 248)²⁵.

Sab's symbolic condemnation of patriarchal society is a strategy that brings the "repressed" (feminine) identity to light, giving voice to his experience as a slave, who like women suffers a diminished status in culture. He internalizes his demeaning position in the form of low self-esteem, which prevents him expressing his true feelings for Carlota. Lacking a strong ego-identity and a language of his own, the masculine side of Sab's imaginary comes to the fore in his feelings of jealousy about Carlota and Enrique. Teresa has to remind him that he is by nature "noble y generoso", telling him that his thoughts are based solely on his "celos y egoísmo" and should not be confused with genuine love (p. 256). She teaches him that by overcoming his jealous and selfish reactions, he will be more in touch with himself and become "más recto y grande", i.e. he will develop greater confidence and self-esteem (p. 256). The resulting conflict between these positive and negative emotions within Sab lead him to desire death, but Teresa remains with him and urges him to "respetar su vida" (p. 257). Sab's subsequent reactions are described as a physical-cum-spiritual transformation, and suggest that he is undergoing an active growth process that has been brought about by Teresa. He is reduced to uncontrollable tears ("Un torrente de lágrimas brotó en seguida de sus ojos"), indicating the release of the tension within him (p. 259). We come to understand that his tears are so overwhelming, because they are not simply over the loss of Carlota, but arise from a wealth of emotions that have built up over the course of a painful life and which are now, for the first time, being expressed fully: "Lo que he padecido a vuestra vista una vez, eso he padecido otras mil, sin que una palabra de consuelo cayese, como

²⁵ Slaves were able to buy their freedom by paying a price of five hundred dollars fixed by law. A mother could buy her child's freedom by paying double the amount of money (Mentioned by Fredrika Bremer, *Cartas desde Cuba* La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1981, p. 74).

una gota de rocío, sobre mi corazón abrasado" (pp. 262–63). Sitting at Teresa's side and pressing her hands against his chest, "sintióse aliviado del peso enorme que le oprimía" (p. 259). He now regains touch with himself through Teresa, whom in turn, he is able to acknowledge as divine, as a "sublime e incomparable mujer" (p. 259). Ignoring her negative status in society as a commodity who lacks physical beauty, he recognises her as a beauty "que proviene del alma, y que el alma conoce mejor que los ojos" (p. 258). This statement also condemns the male over-reliance on the sense of sight, which inevitably results in a partial and distorted image of woman. Thus Sab revalues the feminine, and in Irigarayan words, reinstates the feminine-divine.

Sab seems to emerge from his interaction with Teresa with more self-awareness, allowing him to continue his process of development. Thus, at the moment of departing from Teresa, Sab seems to have achieved a more robust ego-identity: "alzóse del suelo grande, resignado, heroico" (p. 264). He seems to have taken a decision which will put an end to his "corazón tan atormentado" (p. 263). Feeling his heart break, his will to live is lost: "no hay ya en mi corazón sino un sólo deseo, una sola esperanza.... ¡la muerte!" (pp. 263–4). But in a heroic act of sacrificing himself to Carlota's happiness, he decides to leave his lottery win to her, as if she were the real possessor of the ticket, so enabling her marriage to Enrique. He undergoes a long journey to carry out the plan, delivering a letter to Enrique from Carlota's father in which he mentions Carlota's good fortune. However, once he has fulfilled this mission, and realizes Enrique will now marry Carlota, Sab succumbs to the jealousy stifled for so long in the secret recesses of his heart: "¡No hay esperanza! [...] El cielo para él esta vida, y para mi el infierno: porque el infierno está aquí en mi corazón, y en mi cabeza" (p. 275). It is at this moment that we witness the battle to find equilibrium in his self. Feeling this torment enables Sab to establish a relationship with another realm, with his own mortality and with the "other". As a result, he feels a strong need to take refuge in the maternal figure symbolised by the sea, which unfolds before him as if to offer "una tumba en sus abismos profundos" (p. 276). This image of the sea as death is a further indication of how he has internalised his abject position in society, as it is a characteristic male projection of fear of the mother in her culturally terrible image and of the denial of the feminine in himself. However, despite his strong desire for death, Sab manages to resist the sea's "terrible invitación" to die, and instead, he appears to place his life in the hands of the Divine Providence, "ofrec[iendo] a Dios aquel último sacrificio" (p. 276).

Moreover, reflecting their symbolic meaning as a source of life,²⁶ the waters of the sea arouse Sab's instinctive desire to regain an equilibrium in himself and he

²⁶ Cf. J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 281: "The waters of the oceans are thus seen not only as a source of life, but also as its goal. 'To return to the sea' is 'to return to the mother', that is, to die".

experiences a strong need for a bodily-encounter with the mother, represented by Martina. His deep affinity to this divine-mother figure means that he hopes she will apply a healing cure to his tormented self and release his own inner life (p. 307). The image of the maternal Martina awakens in him a reluctance to die; thus caught between his (male) conscious wish to die ("siento la necesidad de morir") and his instinctive (feminine) unconscious need to live ("siento el deseo de vivir"), Sab takes the pen to write to Teresa (p. 307).

At this point, the narrative voice does not refer to the content of his letter or to whom it is addressed, but describes the imbalance that Sab feels while writing: "Sab escribía con mano mal segura y que fue poniéndose más y más trémula" (p. 286). Ultimately, Sab's failure to reconcile his inner with his outer life, and his all-too-human nature condemns him to seek death. Although Sab finally succumbs to death, unrecognized as a whole person in his own right, the letter survives and wins for him, in the narrator's words, the only victory: "¡Una lágrima de Carlota!", a recognition that may symbolize a wider acknowledgement of his message (p. 286). Carlota's tears on Sab's deathbed letter seem to suggest her coming into her feminine inheritance, and his final success in creating a new discourse, "a house of language" through his letter.

Feminist Discourse - Sab's Letter

Just before his death, Sab writes a letter to Teresa, the only person he wishes to bid farewell to: "solamente de vos quiero despedirme" (p. 307). This is a significant gesture of recognition of the bond of marginalization that she shares with him, and through it he fulfils the final phase of his inner development. His letter could be considered a variation of Irigaray's notion of "amorous exchange", both between him and Teresa, as well as being a balanced dialogue between his two identities: one stamped on him by (white, male) culture; the other, his ego-identity, which is of his own creation and which he shares with women. Despite his powerless position in culture, the dying Sab takes up the pen to write to Teresa (and implicitly to the world), intervening on behalf of woman, and taking a distinctly feminist stance in a symbolic manner. The phallic symbol of the pen conveys Sab's empowerment and his determination to express his subjective voice. Sab's writing of his (hi)story—in Teresa's words, "toda un alma: es una vida, una muerte"—gives him the possibility of overcoming death, as the very act of writing constitutes a vehicle of achieving self-awareness and liberation from the social limitations imposed on him (p. 306). In addition, it allows him to transcend death itself, by recreating his life in the minds of its readers (Teresa-Carlota-us) (p. 306): "Esta carta, nosotros los que referimos esta historia fielmente en la memoria, la hemos visto: nosotros la conservamos fielmente en la memoria. Hela aquí" (p. 307).

The letter represents an epilogue to the conversation he had in his previous encounter with Teresa. In addressing his dialogue to the "goddess-like" Teresa ("mujer sublime"), we can witness in Sab an awakening self-awareness of his conflictive identity in society, as he pays tribute to Teresa's superiority and recognizes

his own inferior place as an enslaved man:

Quiero despedirme de vos y daros gracias por vuestra amistad, y por haberme enseñado la generosidad, la abnegación y el heroísmo. Teresa, vos sois una mujer sublime, yo he querido imitaros: pero ¿puede la paloma imitar el vuelo del águila? Vos os levantáis grande y fuerte, ennoblecida por los sacrificios; y yo caigo quebrantado. (pp. 308–309) [my emphasis].

By seeing himself as a dove that desires to be like the eagle that he sees embodied in Teresa, Sab gives voice to his spiritual longing to become a more fulfilled individual. He gives tongue to his desire to be like Teresa ("he querido imitaros"), so that he can imitate her generosity, abnegation and heroism that he as a man lacks. In doing so, he also attributes to the woman qualities such as being "grande" and "fuerte" that are normally attributed to men. Thus he proposes a new image of woman, that is different from the one proposed by patriarchy. Sab's words seem indirectly to censure the views of the patriarchal system which seeks to impose rigid categories and qualities on human beings, whether male or female.

The letter reflects how Sab wishes to die because he is hindered from living to the full or becoming a subject in his own right. This in itself has been a kind of psychological death, as he has been deprived of his masculine identity, of becoming a full person, in the legal sense, in society. His "corazón de hombre" is denied him and the patriarchal voice ("una voz siniestra") or in other words, "las leyes de los hombres", remind him that he is "mulato y esclavo" (pp. 309, 313, 316). His position as a slave has prevented him from realizing his masculinity because he had to sacrifice his love for Carlota. Indeed, as a slave, Sab is excluded from all the traditional male destinies in society, such as love, "la tribuna o el campo de batalla, la pluma [pública] o la espada, la acción o el pensamiento" (p. 312). Thus, his wish to die comes from the conflict between his desire to realize his self-identity and his abject position in society as a mulatto slave.

Sab's suffering at not being able to fulfil his full human potential leads him to understand both his, and women's deprived position in culture and to become closer to God. He comes to terms with the fact that his colour is "una fatalidad eterna, una sentencia de muerte moral", and he considers that death or, in other words, turning to the love of God, is the only way to find wholeness, as "Dios es el Dios de los débiles y de los fuertes" (pp. 312, 316). In Irigarayan terms "the belief in the love of God is the belief in the feminine principle as divine"²⁷. Thus, although Sab's death could be seen as symbolizing his frustration at being unable to express his ego-identity in the (male) symbolic order, it also may symbolize the beginning of a new

²⁷ Irigaray, "Divine Women", *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 72. Irigaray quotes Feuerbach in order to corroborate her thesis that in Western culture, love, including God's love, is feminized: "Without the mother of God, there can be no God. [...] The Father is a truth only where the Mother is a truth. Love is in and by itself essentially feminine in nature. The belief in the love of God is the belief in the feminine principle as divine".

life that transcends death and the limitations forced upon him, freeing him from his abject position in society: "En esta hora suprema [...] pareceme que mi destino no ha sido innoble ni vulgar" (p. 313).

As the writing of the letter progresses, Sab appropriates some words of Othello to emphasize his denunciation of the unjust (male) societal laws which consider colour, and, implicitly, female gender, as immutable stigmata and sentences of moral death: "*no es un baldón el nombre de africano, y el color de mi rostro no paraliza mi brazo*" (p. 312) [Avellaneda's emphasis]. By stating that it is not an insult to be an African (or a woman for that matter), Sab reinstates subordinated races/genders in culture. In addition, he indicates indirectly that he hopes to subvert the paralysing effects of the laws of patriarchal culture. His letter is triumphant and devastating in its analysis of his ultimate victory over patriarchal laws, strengthening his new found ego-identity and bringing him closer to the divine:

Los hombres dirán que yo he sido infeliz por mi culpa; porque he soñado los bienes que no estaban en mi esfera, [...] y tendrán razón delante de un tribunal, pero no en el de mi conciencia. (p. 314)

The analogy with black slavery to express a feminist message becomes even more explicit in the conclusion of the letter, which bears the hallmark of Sab's solidarity with the feminine:

¡Oh, las mujeres! ¡pobres y ciegas víctimas! Como los esclavos, ellas arrastran pacientemente su cadena y bajan la cabeza bajo el yugo de las leyes humanas. Sin otra guía que su corazón ignorante y crédulo eligen un dueño para toda la. (p. 316)²⁸ [my emphasis]

Here, Sab indicates that his reflections on slavery represent a discourse on the destiny of women, and by drawing a direct parallel between the slave and the woman, Sab succeeds in undermining the oppressive male laws which condemn those women (and slaves) who attempt to go against their imposed subordinated and inferior role in culture. Thus, Sab's letter not only draws a parallel between slaves and women, but it is a vehicle to (re)inscribe his subjective identity and censor the oppressive yoke of male bias. His words demonstrate that women in a patriarchal society are victims of slavery just as much as himself as a mulatto slave (p. 316). Man-made laws ("el yugo de las leyes humanas") afford women or slaves no real respect and mask the dangers inherent in their subordinated (invisible) status. These dangers are exposed directly in Sab's description of Carlota entering the oppressive and patriarchal institution of marriage:

²⁸ The analogy of women with slaves is a recurrent theme in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist writing. Mary Wollstonecraft talked about "slavish obedience", and argued that the artificial character imposed on women in male society gave them the "constitution" of slaves and men the occupation of "slave-masters" [*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Everyman, 1929), p. 164].

Carlota, con su anillo nupcial y su corona de virgen... ¡pero la sigue una tropa escuálida y odiosa!...son el desengaño, el tedio, el arrepentimiento... y más atrás ese monstruo de voz sepulcral y cabeza de hierro... ¡lo irremediable! (p. 316) [Avellaneda's emphasis]

Sab's ellipses here are eloquent "silences" that pave the way for an unwritten dialogue with the reader whose aim is to expose the demeaned position of Carlota and of other women in society and marriage. Sab's letter claims that men, not God, create inequality and oppression²⁹. The explicit contrast drawn between the laws of God and man highlights the whole debate on the position of slaves (and thus of women) in patriarchal culture: "Dios [...] ha repartido sus beneficios con equidad sobre todos los países del globo. [...] Dios es el Dios de los débiles como de los fuertes" (pp. 310, 316). Sab's protest is that of liberalism, condemning a system of inherited privilege which excludes those who possess "virtudes y talentos" (p. 315):

¿Por qué establecen [los hombres] grandezas y prerrogativas hereditarias? ¿Tienen ellos el poder de hacer hereditarias las virtudes y los talentos? ¿Por qué se rechazará al hombre que sale de la oscuridad, diciéndole «vuelve a la nada, hombre sin herencia [...]»? (p. 315)

The emphasis on "hombres" in this passage clearly draws attention to the whole issue of gender, for the reader is invited to think of women having to exist in the context of a patriarchal society and so to question the issue of the humanity of the enslaved individual. Thus, Avellaneda makes clear her belief that to be denied the possibility of expressing subjective identity as in the case of slaves/women, is to be denied one's full humanity. Sab indirectly proposes a more just society where blacks (and implicitly women) are equal with whites—white being the colour of the dominant culture, and implicitly male—thereby overcoming the ignorance and absurdity of the present corrupt state of society. Sab exhorts women unhappy in their marriage not to rebel against God, as it is the laws of men that are the cause of women's oppression. Thus, Sab says to Carlota:

Tu destino es triste, pobre ángel, pero no te vuelvas nunca contra Dios, ni equivoques con sus santas leyes las leyes de los hombres. [...] Dios es el Dios de los débiles como de los Fuertes. (p. 316)

By putting forward the notion that God's laws must never be reduced to mere patriarchal laws, the "feminine" male slave provides a space for a more inclusive discourse that can embrace both slaves/women and men, both "débiles y fuertes" (p. 316):

Me acuerdo que cuando mi amo me enviaba a confesar mis culpas a los pies de un sacerdote, yo preguntaba al ministro de Dios qué haría para alcanzar la virtud. La virtud del esclavo, me respondía, es obedecer y callar, servir con humildad y resignación a sus legíti-

²⁹ Like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her "Respuesta a Sor Filotea", Sab uses religious discourse in the middle of the nineteenth century to argue that God has given him a superior nature in spite of the deplorable destiny imposed on him by man.

mos dueños, y no juzgarlos nunca (p. 309) [my emphasis].

Sab's words illustrate clearly how patriarchal law deviates from God's law and how it fails to establish equality with respect to "black" slaves (and white women). The clichéd male references: "obedecer, y callar, servir con humildad y resignación" that are put in the mouth of the (male) "ministro de Dios", who is the male symbolic order's representative of God, clearly echo the restrictions placed on any attempt by women to speak their (female) subjective identity.³⁰ In the mid-nineteenth century, the (male) discourse of power, both existential and spiritual, originated from the omnipotent authority of God and the father, which was exercised through the institutions of Church, state and family. Thus, the socio-cultural values that undermined black people and women were reinforced by the Church's demand for abnegation in both groups.

Part of Sab's strategy is to put forward the idea that increased self-awareness and self-knowledge are part of a process of the individual becoming more god-like, by overcoming the institutionalized restrictions that the Church exerts in the name of God. Sab implicitly brings into relief the need for women to speak and therefore inscribe their (divine-human) identity in discourse, rather than let it remain unconscious, unspoken and therefore unrecognized. That Sab's letter symbolizes the recognition and re-instatement of the divine feminine is underlined by its last words which are a hymn devoted to Carlota and Teresa:

¡Carlota!... acaso ahora mismo... —muera yo antes —¡Dios mío!...mi alma vuela hacia ti... adiós, Teresa... la pluma cae de mi mano... ¡adiós!... Yo he amado, yo he vivido... ya no vivo...pero aún amo (p. 317).

Sab dies "abrasado en el santo fuego del amor" (p. 314). As a man in culture, he has learnt to love the feminine in all its forms, by articulating his relationship with the feminine principle through his "mother" Martina; the sister-or-friend-like Teresa and his beloved Carlota. In his letter, his and their ambivalent position in society finds final expression. Although Sab's missive cannot directly remedy the evils it deplors in Carlota's situation and although it leaves the female slave system unchanged, Sab's letter acts as a legacy to the world and to women. Because he seems to speak on behalf of all women, it also allows him to place himself unmistakably in the female genealogy and it marks an important stage in his personal evolution. In sum, Sab's legacy is that of regeneration of a world in which "los hombres llevarán un sello divino y el ángel de la poesía radiará sus rayos sobre el nuevo reinado de la inteligencia" (p. 317).

The story of Sab's death is compelling for the same reason that the story of Christ's death is compelling. Sab's death mirrors, to some extent, that of Christ, in

³⁰ See Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 142: "By creating a male God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit) [men] have given infinite extension to the male principle, while assigning women the role of guardians of death (sex and death are then fused in a deathly equation.). They *incorporate* the feminine rather than recognizing women".

its power to redeem unjust patriarchal codes through the "resurrección de los justos" (p. 285). It enacts a philosophy, as much cultural as religious, in which the pure and powerless die to save the powerful and corrupt, revealing themselves to be more powerful than those they save. Sab's death presents one aspect of the theme of sacrifice on which the entire novel is based: the sacrifice of woman under the patriarchal system exemplified by Teresa and Carlota, as well as by the feminized Sab. The message of *Sab* is all the more powerful because it advances a feminist ideology in the context of, and intimately linked to, a number of the contemporary culture's key concerns, the religious myth of the Crucifixion, the iniquity of slavery and the sanctity of marriage. The triumphant flowering of the feminine which comes about via Sab's letter and which is his lasting legacy indicate how Avellaneda's main purpose in the novel is to give form to the inner feminine. Sab's letter is also "the container overflowing with authorial enthusiasm" that has been rightly identified as a protest against the oppression of the nineteenth-century woman writer.³¹ The fulfilment both Sab and Avellaneda obtained from writing thus becomes a conduit for expressing the orgasmic overflowing of female pleasure (*jouissance*), which is normally so repressed or misrepresented in a phallogentric society, that its very expression becomes a key instrument for deconstructing this control³².

³¹ Mary Jacobus, *Feminist Literary Theory. A Reader*, p. 218.

³² Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy and the Feminine*, pp. 85–86.