Gómez de Avellaneda’s Sab: A Modernizing Project

Abstract: Following critics of Gómez de Avellaneda, who have suggested her contribution to national discourses of the nineteenth century, this article calls for a new look at her novel Sab. Through an analysis of the spatial, narrative, and discursive representations of “civilization and barbarism” in the novel, this study shows the author proposing a modernizing project that transcends Cuba. Avellaneda’s project is significant for understanding her transatlantic influence and reflects the complexities of her position as woman writer and colonial Other.

Keywords: Avellaneda, Civilization and Barbarism, Cuban National Discourses, Sab, Transatlanticism, Women Writers

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda wrote her novelSabbetween 1836 and 1838 in Europe. The novel was published in Madrid in 1841 after Avellaneda settled there in 1840. After her biological father died, her mother, a Cuban criolla, remarried another Spanish military figure and the family traveled to Spain in 1836 when the author was twenty-two; her first long separation from Cuba is immortalized in her sonnet “Al partir.” This transatlantic voyage has fostered the ambiguity of Avellaneda’s national literary status and political allegiance to Cuba, as Catherine Davis articulates: “…should she be credited to (or appropriated by) the cultures and literary traditions of the colony or the metropolis? Why not to both?” (423). Sab has traditionally been interpreted as an anti-slavery novel written not only to stand against the business of slavery in Cuba, but also as a way of concealing perhaps a more radical subtext relating to the gender disparities of her time, as evidenced by women’s roles and marriage. The scholarship’s main focus on race and gender has kept the novel and author from being studied in the context of the larger discourses of the independence period of Latin America. María Albin, Beth Miller and Alan Deyermond have pointed to this critical lacuna in their respective studies of Avellaneda’s poetic production. They have specifically found in her poetry evidence of an Americanist conscience and preoccupation with civilization versus barbarism. Following these critical observations, I will further explore Avellaneda’s dialogue in her novel Sab with the paradigm of civilization and barbarism institutionalized by the canonized Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in hisCivilización y Barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga(1845).

The discourses of civilization and barbarism in relationship to geographic spaces became a central preoccupation in the modernizing projects of nineteenth-century Spain and Latin America.¹ These centralizing projects gave rise to physical and ideological distinctions between urban and rural areas, where the former rose as the sites of bourgeois progress and modernity while the latter became places identified as agrarian or planter societies, lagging behind in the path towards civilization. While Avellaneda uses the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism in relationship to urban and rural spaces as a point of departure, she also complicates this binary and underscores the various meanings given to it. Like Sarmiento, Avellaneda associates the city with progress, science, education, and economic change. She links the countryside with barbarism, degeneracy, the supernatural, and superstition, so that in many ways it is “Other” to the city. This article will show how Avellaneda creates characters from different class sectors that travel between urban and rural spaces represented in the novel. Through the travels of two main characters, Enrique and Sab, Avellaneda reveals the hegemonic meaning given to these spaces, specifically that of civilization and barbarism, and allows for this binary to
be undone and redefined. In so doing, the author emphasizes the fluidity of this binary and thus, begins to destabilize other categories, such as class, gender, and race, and reveal their constructions. This study also focuses on a secondary character, Martina, who does not travel but is relevant to the discussion of civilization and barbarism in her spatial positioning and representation in the novel. Through Martina’s character, Avellaneda implies her own negotiations with being a woman writer in a patriarchal literary tradition but at the same time reveals her proposal for a modern Cuba: a redefinition of the traditions upheld there, such as the Eurocentric and male-dominated perspective of history and culture.

The novel opens with the familiar travel trope of a foreigner entering an unknown geographic space. Enrique Otway, who displays an elegant posture and appearance, confidently rides his horse to Don Carlos de B’s estate. He stops briefly during his travel, not because he is unsure or afraid of the unknown land, but as the narrator implies: “A la verdad, era harto probable que sus repetidas detenciones sólo tuvieran por objeto admirar más a su sabor los campos fertilísimos de aquel país privilegiado, y que debían tener mayor atractivo para él” (102). Immediately, the narrator hints at the traveler’s economic interests with regard to the Cuban landscape and thus Enrique’s visual consumption of nature’s bounty is placed in light of mercantile profit. Enrique’s first encounter with Sab, our second traveler, is one of miscommunication and it underscores his inability to comprehend all of the signs of the new space he enters. The meeting between these travelers serves as an example of the “normative” model for the Western traveler, which James Clifford has described as: “. . . in the dominant discourses of travel, a non-white person cannot figure as a heroic explorer, aesthetic interpreter, or scientific authority” (33). The narrator’s generalized physical description of Enrique: “su tez blanca y sonrosada, sus ojos azules, y su cabello de oro,” suggests his “northern origin” (Avellaneda 103). Enrique fits the traditional image of the civilized traveler who is white, European, and travels for luxury and/or profit. Clifford also explains that a host of servants, helpers, companions, guides and bearers have been excluded from the role of “proper” travelers because of their race and class, and because theirs seemed to be a dependent status in relation to the supposed independence of the bourgeois voyager (33).

Sab becomes Enrique’s guide to Don Carlos’s estate, and thus functions as an example of the bourgeois traveler’s servant or what Clifford again terms “native informant.” The author only gives the reader a subtle indication of Sab’s native origins in Cuba. He is introduced by singing a tune about love and heartache, which Avellaneda footnotes, thus telling the reader of the locals’ ability and charming way of singing these types of songs (103). This tune not only has a proleptic function here of Sab’s emotional conflict in the novel, but also allows the author to include an example of Cuban oral traditions. Given Sab’s ambiguous physical presentation, graceful gestures, and articulate language, Enrique, on the other hand, is unable to pinpoint his racial identity and class position. Sab is physically described as a “cruzamiento de dos razas diversas, en que se amalgamaban . . . rasgos de la casta africana con los de la europea” (104). Sab’s appearance perplexes Enrique and, for most of their trip, the latter is convinced that Sab is either a neighbor or a landowner like Don Carlos de B. Hence, Enrique’s colonizing language, which functions within the fixed racial binaries of white and black, is unable to fully describe Sab, who is neither one nor the other, and who for a short time is able to blur the racial and economic categories that are prevalent in nineteenth-century Cuba.
Sommer has described as: “an elusive American referent unable to be understood within the inherited signs of a European language” (117).

In contrast to Enrique’s perception of nature as a fertile space for profit, Sab inscribes onto it the history of slave labor and suffering. Upon discussing the state of Don Carlos’s land with Enrique, Sab responds with this lament: “. . . bajo este cielo de fuego el esclavo casi desnudo trabaja toda la mañana sin descanso, ya la hora terrible del mediodía jadeando, abrumado bajo el peso de la leña y de la caña que conduce sobre sus espaldas, y abrasado por los rayos del sol que tuesta su cutis . . .” (106). He takes the opportunity in this interrogation to voice the suffering of those who have no voice, the African slaves in Cuba, with an eloquent expression that continues to mystify his traveling companion. Sab’s comments about slaves’ suffering leads him to finally reveal his origin to Enrique, who admits his misunderstanding: “Bien lo sospeché al principio; pero tienes un aire tan poco común en tu clase, que luego mudé de pensamiento” (108). Though already aware of Sab’s class status, Enrique continues to believe that he does not fit the traditional image of the African slave and, thus associates him with the noble savage. Sab can be compared to this figure because of his elegant presence and sophisticated speech, along with his connection to African slaves and their closeness to nature (Steeves 98). However, he is not completely outside of or untouched by civilization as is the classic representation of the noble savage, but rather, is educated and raised alongside his master’s daughter (Carlota) and is, as the narrative implies, Don Carlos’s biological nephew. The protagonist is not without conflict, unlike the noble savage who was typically depicted as innocent, contented, and carefree. Instead, Sab bears the brunt of knowing his fellow slaves’ suffering, although not experiencing it in the same way, but instead suffers the heartache of an impossible love for Carlota.

Since civilized society was also believed to be the cause of corruption and degradation, then one who was raised outside of civilization in the natural, and therefore inherently good “New World,” would necessarily be of a kind and noble disposition. Thus, one immediate connection made was between the New World and a utopian Garden of Eden (3). This mythical reference is not absent from Avellaneda’s novel, as she describes Cuba as: “. . . un vasto y magnifico vergel formado por la naturaleza y al que no osaba el arte competir” (143). Nevertheless, the novel’s “noble savage,” despite sharing a special communion with nature, appropriates it by making his own garden out of the vast and wild space as a gift for Carlota. The narrative explains how Sab accomplishes this: “No dominaba el gusto inglés ni el francés en aquel lindo jardínillo: Sab no había consultado sino sus caprichos al formarle” (143). Although not directly using European forms of horticulture, the creation of Sab’s garden nevertheless implies the “reorganization” of a Cuban landscape and the constraining of nature. Sab collects in the garden all of Carlota’s favorite flowers, so that he becomes a symbolic naturalist by creating his own botanical garden. Avellaneda’s allusion to European horticulture in Sab’s creation of the garden also suggests a kind of transculturation, or a re-appropriation of colonial models to create a unique Cuban form. By not following specific civilizing guidelines, Sab is able to express his own sense of freedom through the creation of this new space and symbolically re-writes a Cuban text. In so doing, he challenges the imposed definition of nature, Cuba as Eden, inscribed on this colony. In this way, Sab continues to blur the division between civilization and barbarism and at the same time, he expresses through nature his love for Carlota.
Enrique’s return to Puerto Príncipe to visit his father, on the other hand, gives the reader a clearer sense of the mercantilist drive that the Otways represent in the novel. The discussion between Enrique and his father, Jorge Otway, reveals the latter’s perception of marriage as a business transaction and as a way of guaranteeing his and his son’s future investments: “Un comerciante . . . se casa con una mujer lo mismo que se asocia con un compañero, por especulación, por conveniencia” (152). Jorge emphasizes the exchange value of capital in marriage, but for him a woman’s body will not suffice because it must also include additional commodities. Enrique’s father resides in a provincial city and along with his son’s travels there, prompts the reader to associate commercialism with this urban space. The author implicitly conflates the urban space with a new culture of commercialism and with Enrique’s “first-rate” education, which he received abroad in Europe, as a way of suggesting a generic model of civilization. Influenced in part by Rousseau’s perception of civilization as a corruptive force on man, Avellaneda does not depict commercialism in a positive light, and through the portrayal of Jorge’s story of economic progress she points to the rise of an opportunistic and materialistic social group in Cuba. Jorge represents an influx of foreign immigrants in Cuba who had taken advantage of its resources so that they may “enriquecerse de una manera asombrosa para los indolentes isleños” (Avellaneda 119). The narrator perceives these foreign opportunists as avaricious and implies that their spirit of consumption makes them cold usurpers of the natives’ long-established businesses (119). By being critical of foreign economic investment and the new influx of immigration, Avellaneda sets herself apart from her criollo compatriots in Cuba, whose reformist solution for the growth of the black population was that Cuba be “whitened” through a sustained immigration of cheap labor of European origin (Benítez-Rojo 440). This divergence also recalls Sarmiento’s modernizing project for Argentina as he condemns the dictator Rosas’ insulting rebuke against European immigration. He, on the contrary, finds the answer here:

Porque él ha perseguido el nombre europeo, y hostiliizado la inmigración de extranjeros, el NUEVO GOBIERNO establecerá grandes asociaciones para introducir población y distribuir la terrítorios feraces a orillas de los inmensos ríos, y en veinte años sucederá lo que en Norte América ha sucedido en igual tiempo… (Sarmiento 364).

Returning to Don Carlos’s family, Enrique, and Sab, who once again serves as a guide, the reader observes them making a third trip in the novel. Although recreational, it also allows for the reader to recognize Sab’s knowledge and “control” of the Cuban topography. Before the family prepares for the trip, we learn that Sab has helped to care for Don Carlos’s land in Cubitas and has allowed him a kind of liberty with the land that reminds readers of his creation of the aforementioned garden:

Hace diez años que no he estado en Cubitas y aun antes de esta época visité muy pocas veces las estancias que tengo allí. Estaban casi abandonadas, pero desde que Sab vino a Bellavista sus frecuentes visitas a Cubitas les han sido de mucha utilidad y creo que las hallaré en mejor estado que cuando las vi la última vez. (162)

In his movement between Cubitas and Don Carlos’s estate, Sab further creates a sense of ambiguity in his class status. On the estate Sab continues to be a slave, privileged nonetheless,
yet in Cubitas he plays the role of surrogate “landowner”. His frequent visits to Cubitas provide him with the knowledge to become familiar with the route, in such a way that Sab has the freedom of finding new paths there, as the narrator shows: “... les manifestó entonces su plan de marcha, iba a conducirlos a Cubitas no por el camino real sino por una senda poco conocida, que aunque algo más dilatada les ofrecería puntos de vistas más agradables” (165). Here we see that Sab does not follow the predetermined path created by the colonial state (el camino real), but instead decides to take an alternative trail. Following Michel de Certeau’s concepts of place and space, Sab’s decision to take an alternative route can signify his destabilization of the “places” created to control the movement of Cuban subjects and again to re-write a Cuban text and create new spaces. His travel in this context can also be compared to what Caren Kaplan calls “nomadism”, which allows “... an anarchic relationship to space and subjectivity, resistant to the nation-state apparatus” (87). In the same way that Sab reveals a liminal subjectivity by being both identified as civilized and barbaric, landowner and slave, he is able to destabilize the hegemonic divisions imposed on Cuban colonial space.

Sab’s topographic knowledge can also be compared to Sarmiento’s appraisal of the Argentine gaucho’s diverse skills. For example, in his discussion of the baqueano we witness his admiration of this figure, “el topógrafo más completo,” for his almost superhuman knowledge of the Pampa. Although the gaucho inhabits the barbaric mass of the Pampa, which is the great obstacle to Argentina’s progress, at the same time, Sarmiento recognizes a hint of sophistication in the “ciencia del baqueano” (88). Critics of Sarmiento have underscored the ambiguity in his general condemnation of the gauchos in his writing, by showing how the Romantic writer also finds the gaucho attractive in his beautiful portrayal of the gaucho types and customs, as the example of the baqueano above shows (Shumway 585). Yet Avellaneda, unlike Sarmiento, does not exalt the figure of the mulatto Sab as a mere romantic gesture. Her intention leans more in the direction of legitimizing and establishing the rights of the disenfranchised in the land they work and inhabit.

As the caravan enters Cubitas, the reader is made aware that it is different from Puerto Príncipe, the urban space of commerce and civilization. The narrative indicates that the topography of Cubitas changes in form; the soil is red and the vegetation sparse, yet more exotic, and of ghastly shapes, which at night give the town a mysterious ambience. A twinkling light on the horizon incites an explanation from Sab that involves the legend of Camagüey. The tale tells of Camagüey’s unfair murder and of the conflictive encounter between the indigenous population of Cuba and the European colonizers. The cubiteros believe that the twinkling light is really the indigenous chief’s soul that has returned as a warning to a new generation who must avenge his death. Sab’s recounting of this legend also provokes mention of Martina, who keeps the memory of Camagüey alive through her storytelling and claims to be a descendant of the chief.

Just as Martina refuses to forget the “history” of Camagüey, Sab also continues the oral tradition and the story of Cuba’s indigenous people. However, some of Sab’s listeners do not receive the story with the same credence as the inhabitants of Cubitas. Don Carlos responds to the legend of the twinkling light with disbelief and sarcasm as he says: “... los naturalistas ... darían una explicación menos divertida” (167). Through his comment, Don Carlos makes reference to the Eurocentric system of natural history influenced by Carl von Linné’s Systema Naturae, published in the eighteenth century, and discredits Sab and Martina’s story, giving it a supernatural slant. The systematizing of nature, which is implied by Don Carlos’s reference to
Linnaean thought, also highlights the distinction between the urban and rural worlds taking place here in the differentiation between Puerto Príncipe and Cubitas. As Mary Louise Pratt has argued, this new system of thought: “represents not only a European discourse about non-European worlds . . . but an urban discourse about non-urban worlds, and a lettered, bourgeois discourse about non-lettered, peasant worlds” (34-35). From this point in the novel, Cubitas is implicitly defined as a place of Cuban lore and the supernatural, placed in contrast with Puerto Príncipe, which is a space associated with scientific or commercial development. Sab’s frequent trips between Puerto Príncipe and Cubitas create an allegorical link between the scientific and fantastic, civilization and barbarism, and again he is placed in an ambiguous position within these spaces. On Don Carlos’s estate Sab has been “educated” and like “civilized man” taught to read and write alongside Carlota. Yet, in Cubitas he plays a role in conserving the memory of Cuba’s oral history, by circulating the legend of Camagüey.

Avellaneda represents civilization and barbarism as connecting and often conflicting spaces on the plot level in her novel, but also creates a similar intermingling of this dichotomy at the extra-textual level. The author incorporates Cuban folkloric discourse by including the legend of Camagüey and by making reference to the oral traditions practiced by Martina and Sab. The narrative counters this discourse with the skepticism of Don Carlos, who represents a more scientific, naturalist discourse. Avellaneda reinforces these contradictory arguments in her footnotes, as the reader receives an explanation of the legend of Camagüey. In the footnote, she features part of a journal article that refutes the local account of the twinkling light, provided by the cubiteros, in favor of a scientific justification. She does not explicitly favor one explanation over the other, but instead says:

Sin pararnos a examinar si es o no fundada esta conjetura, y dejando a nuestros lectores la libertad de formar juicios más exactos, adoptamos por ahora la opinión de los cubiteros y explicaremos el fenómeno, en la continuación de la historia tal cual nos ha sido referido y explicado más de una vez. (167)

The author leaves the validity of these two suppositions to be measured by the readers’ judgment, but nevertheless mentions that the cubiteros’ version would be the one most valued in the context at hand, that is, in the space of Cubitas. Here, Avellaneda brings together the folkloric with a more scientific form in the use of the footnotes. It appears that Avellaneda is juxtaposing two dichotomous discourses and legitimizing a form that is otherwise expressed through oral tradition and devalued next to its scientific counterpart.

The narrative voice functions as yet another element that adds to the dichotomy between folklore and science in the novel. On the one hand, through Sab’s narration the reader learns of Martina’s social value in Cubitas and among the community of cubiteros (slaves and farmers). According to Sab, Martina claims to be a descendent of Camagüey and authenticates her relation to him through her knowledge of indigenous medicine and her role as storyteller in the community. Similar to Don Carlos’s mockery of Martina when he says: “. . . ella si mal no me acuerdo tiene sus puntos de loca: ¿no pretende ser descendiente de la raza india y aparenta un aire ridículamente majestuoso?” (167), the narrator adds interpolated statements that appear to undermine the seriousness of this character. For example, the narrator describes Martina as
“ridículosamente majestuosa” or “una parodia de hospitalidad” and with a “ridícula gravedad” (176-179). The ridicule is not only limited to Martina but also extended to the representation of the cubiteros. The narrative describes their oral tradition as comprised of “cuentos maravillosos” that manifests their “imaginación ardiente” and “opiniones extravagantes,” especially with regard to the lore surrounding the caves of Cubitas (174). The narrative voice, as a result, reveals a level of skepticism that helps to define the space of Cubitas as a place of folklore and superstition.

Avellaneda’s inclusion and validation of folkloric forms and of more scientific accreditation point to a struggle between two discourses in the novel: a European rational discourse, represented through writing and scientific language, and the folkloric/oral tradition of the native indigenous groups. How do we justify the juxtaposition of these otherwise conflictive discourses? The attention given to oral traditions in Latin America is evidence of an important strategy for modernizing projects in the nineteenth century. In his chapter, “Saber del otro: escritura y oralidad en el Facundo de D.F. Sarmiento,” Julio Ramos discusses the role of oral tradition in the modernizing projects:

Para Sarmiento había que conocer toda esa zona de la vida americana–la barbarie–que resultaba irrepresentable para la “ciencia” y los “documentos oficiales.” Había que oír al otro; oír su voz, ya que el otro carecía de escritura. Eso es lo que el saber disciplinado, y sus importadores, no habían logrado hacer; el otro saber–saber del otro–resultaría así decisivo en la restauración del orden y del proyecto modernizador. (41)

Ramos explains that the purpose of oral traditions in literature was to represent the presence of the Other. Writing for Sarmiento was parallel to order and modernization, and it represented the knowledge which the Other, or marginal peoples of society, lacked in order to be inscribed into a national “text” (43). According to Ramos, Sarmiento believed that national literature was the appropriate place for “... la mediación necesaria entre la civilización y la barbarie, la modernidad y la tradición, la escritura y la oralidad” (45). Could Avellaneda’s juxtapositions of civilization and barbarism, science and folklore, oral traditions and writing in the novel reflect her own “modernizing project”? At the very least, these give us an insight into a developing Americanist consciousness signaled by critics in her poetry.

Avellaneda gives voice to the Other by including the oral traditions of the cubiteros and depicting Martina and Sab as protectors and disseminators of that tradition. Ramos suggests that representing the savage or Other in Sarmiento’s ideology: “... presupone el deseo de incluirlo para subordinarlo a la generalidad de la ley de la civilización” (51). Avellaneda’s purpose in giving a voice to the Other is a less aggressive one then Sarmiento’s. She would stand against Sarmiento’s opinion of race in the Americas, which he viewed as resulting in: “un todo homogéneo, que se distingue por su amor a la ociosidad e incapacidad industrial cuando la educación y las exigencias de una posición social no vienen a ponerle espuela y sacarla de su paso habitual” (64). Her “project,” is more open to difference and gives agency and legitimization to those voices that were excluded from a hegemonic Cuban History, such as black and mulatto slaves, European women, or indigenous women. Placing her alongside the Cuban criollo intellectuals of her time, they too struggled to find a space in national literature for
marginal peoples and traditions of Cuba, such as the black slave and the guajiro (or the indigenous peasant of Cuba), but again, Avellaneda extends her project to various Others, to include the oppression of women. If Avellaneda’s novel reveals a kind of modernizing project that places her on a par with patriot intellectuals of her time, what then does this mean for a woman writer?

In her research on the predominant influence of European expansionist discourses on the writings of the independence period of Latin America, Pratt underscores a divergence in the writings of Creole women that “drew quite different maps of meaning” than their male contemporaries (190). Catherine Davis and Adriana Méndez Rodenas both agree that Avellaneda contributed to national discourses, but from a more marginal position, by underlining the problematic relationship between woman and nation. Davis’s research demonstrates the “uneven gendering of the national citizen,” which partly explains why Avellaneda was kept out of the Cuban national canon for some time (443). In a comparative study of Avellaneda and one of her contemporaries, María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo, Méndez Rodenas interprets Sab as an example of Cuban “proto-feminism,” but also as a hybrid discourse that parallels the representation of woman with other national types and therefore contributing to the emergent national discourses (13). All of these critics point to the double marginalization of Creole women writers, not only experienced through their gender but also in their position as colonial Other. Through the character of Martina, Avellaneda gives voice to the Other in multiple forms; she represents a double oppression as a descendent of a nearly vanished indigenous lineage and as a woman. Next to the more “privileged” character, Sab, Martina is placed at an inferior level, since he is somewhat educated and has the knowledge of writing, as exemplified in the letter that closes the novel.

Returning to Avellaneda’s footnotes in the novel, the reader can also find references to Cuba’s physical space and other traditions. With these footnotes, Avellaneda demonstrates her own knowledge of the Cuban landscape by including descriptions and definitions of the flora and fauna and species native to her country. She also includes details of the machinery used to produce sugar and in the slave system. Stacy Schlau has interpreted Avellaneda’s use of footnotes as a pedagogic mechanism, which places her in the role of “... an interpreter of American reality for her readers” (501). If we consider the history of the novel’s publication, which shows that it was first published in Madrid in 1841, we can estimate that her primary audience was European. Along with Schlau’s reading, we can concur that Avellaneda’s modernizing project not only included giving voice to the Other, but also incorporated the figurative translation of a Cuban “text” for a foreign audience. We cannot help but compare Avellaneda’s footnotes, especially her cataloguing of Cuba’s plants and animals, to the Linnaean systematizing of nature discussed earlier. This association would put the author in the place of the naturalist or botanist (like with Sab and his garden) that produced “new knowledge” for a European audience. However, Avellaneda figuratively inverts this Eurocentric gaze and instead places herself in the space of the Other as a native inhabitant of a colonized geographic space. If Avellaneda puts herself in the place of the Other and is writing from the metropolis, and using scholarly forms, such as footnotes and at times emulating travel writing, could we not interpret the novel as an example of transculturation? As with Martina, Avellaneda also becomes the promulgator of an alternative Cuban history and therefore opens a space of authority for women and other marginal subjects.
In the novel, Martina comes to symbolize an alternative form of Cuban history, or an example of what Michel Foucault has termed “subjugated knowledges”. Foucault defines these as: “. . . a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientficity” (“Two Lectures” 82). Martina’s historical version of Cuba’s past, disseminated in a distinct style and through a non-written medium, is not perceived as legitimate in the novel. Yet at the same time, in representing Martina as guardian and promulgator of this “history,” Avellaneda modifies the traditional role of historian, reserved for European men and for those who write, and allows a space for this indigenous woman to tell her version. This feminization of history continues throughout the novel with the representation of Martina as a surrogate mother, taking the place of the absent biological mothers.

The absence of biological mothers is made evident through the four main characters, Carlota, Sab, Teresa, and Enrique, who are either orphans or whose mothers have died. Turning our attention again to the character of Sab, in his very first encounter with Enrique we get a glimpse of his origin. When Enrique asks for his name he responds: “Mi nombre de bautismo es Bernabé, mi madre me llamó Sab, y así me han llamado luego mis amos” (108). Sab identifies his origin with a maternal figure; that is, his mother has marked his identity. His actions contradict the patriarchal tradition referenced in the epigraph opening the first chapter, which reads: “¿Quién eres? ¿Cuál es tu patria?” (101). Instead of signaling his origin in the figure of the father, Sab gives precedence to the maternal. In her well-known work, Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America, Sommer discusses the need for Avellaneda to transgress the order of the father, in Lacanian terms, to construct her protagonist’s identity. She posits that the patriarchal lines depicted in the novel suffer a crisis and concludes that Sab does not desire to fill the place of the father. There is then a vacant space left in the place of the symbolic patriarchal order, where the father represents authority and the law. In this open space, “. . . ‘author-ity’ can pass on to new hands, feminine and/or mulatto hands” (Sommer 119). As a result, Sab transfers this authority to the maternal by tracing his origin to his mother and by also embracing Martina as his adoptive mother. Martina then becomes the symbol of a new order and, as Sommer suggests, a new authority. Following Sommer’s line of thought, I propose that the new matriarchal order inscribed at the center of the novel through Martina can also be interpreted as a symbolic feminization of history. She is not only a new figure of authority, but as Sommer playfully puts forward: “author-ity.” Thus, Martina is given authorial legitimacy, and, as I argue, in telling the story of Camagüey and the indigenous past, she also “re-writes” Cuban colonial history.

The centralization of a matriarchal order in the novel can be understood as an attempt to highlight the existence of female precursors. In their classic article, “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss the strategies that women writers implement to legitimize their positions as writers within a patriarchal literary tradition:

In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called “Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with
fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . an act of survival.” Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. (292)

Avellaneda also searches for a way to legitimize her authorship by “looking back” to older and alternative forms, such as the oral tradition, with which to re-create history and establish an alternative female tradition. By including “subjugated knowledges” on a par with a hegemonic Cuban history and patriarchal literary tradition, Avellaneda also blurs the divisions between the written/oral, scientific/supernatural, civilization/barbarism, and masculine/feminine.

Studying Avellaneda’s influence on the wider Latin American discourses, such as that of civilization versus barbarism, reveals the androcentric limitations of the criollo intellectual circles and their definitions of nation and citizenship. Some critics have argued that what has kept Avellaneda out of a Latin American context was her separation from Cuba at an early age, but we should also recall that several American intellectuals wrote their foundational texts in exile. Avellaneda’s transatlanticism gives her a more complex positionality that is both central and periphery. In this way she is able to imagine a modernizing project that presents a rich and diverse image of Cuba worthy of legitimization, liberty and equality in the face of imperialism.

NOTES:

1 Considering the date of the publication of Sab and Sarmiento’s monumental work Civilización y barbarie: vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga in 1845, we can conjecture that Avellaneda’s representation of this binary anticipates Sarmiento’s text. For Sarmiento, the dynamics of history were seen as a conflict between native (American) barbarism and cosmopolitan (European) civilization. Yet, Sarmiento’s discourse was not a new one, but one that he highlighted and adapted from a trope which had prevailed in connection with America from the time of the conquests, and even before, when the constricted imagination of medieval Europe had felt the need for an idealized Other against which to measure itself (Fishburn 204). Avellaneda is also informed by discourses of civilization and barbarism in the historical texts she uses as her direct references for her third novel, Guatimozín (1846), the colonial historians of the Conquest of Mexico, such as: Cartas de relación. De la conquista de Méjico by Hernán Cortés, Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and Historia Antigua de Méjico by Francisco Javier Clavijero.

2 Marie Louise Pratt studies the influence of Alexander Von Humboldt’s travelogues and discourse in the Latin American intellectual writings and modernizing projects, hence Avellaneda’s appropriation here of the traveler paradigm. Pratt warns critics from misinterpreting this appropriation as imitating or reproducing European discourses, but to instead interpret it as a point of departure for other, criollismo imaginative and ideological projects (184).

3 Race relations in Cuba cannot be summed up simply according to the divisions of “white” and “non-white.” The diverse encounters of various racial groups in Cuba, as well as the violent outcome of its slave system, produced a much more complex reality that I will not develop here but is nevertheless implied by Avellaneda’s protagonist’s class and racial liminality. These diverse racial encounters have
given fruit to the discourse of *mestizaje*, or racial amalgamation, that has imbued the cultural reality of the Caribbean (Kutzinski 5).

4 My use of “transculturation” follows Pratt’s use of the same ethnographic term describing “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (6).

5 *Cubitas* translates into “Cuba pequeña,” it is significant that Sab gains more liberty here and that it is a place associated with folklore and tradition in the novel. The agricultural divisions in nineteenth-century Cuba caused a schism there geographically, ethnologically, and socially into a “Cuba grande,” an authoritarian Cuba with its sugar mills and whose culture was oriented towards the foreign sugar markets. And a “Cuba pequeña,” that looked inward toward the land and its cultural poles were formed by the diverse elements of folklore and tradition. The latter was perceived as the repository of indigenous cultural values and of the heterogeneity that was characteristic of the society that preceded the development of sugar production (Benítez Rojo 15).

6 De Certeau defines “place” as an instantaneous configuration of positions, meaning it implies an indication of stability, such as a map. “Space” is then an intersection of mobile elements, i.e. pedestrians, thus, De Certeau envisions space as a “practiced place” (117).

7 Santa María de Puerto Príncipe is Avellaneda’s birthplace in Cuba and where her family lived before transitioning to Spain. Puerto Príncipe is current-day Camagüey, the third largest city located in central Cuba. Sierra de “Cubitas” is a small-mountain town located on the north periphery of the province of Camagüey; it is a tourist attraction for its caves, some of which contain Amerindian drawing. In chapter ten, Sab again serves as guide for Enrique and Carlota’s family, but this time through the ominous caves.

8 The pre-conquest population of Taíno and Ciboney indigenous groups was located mainly on the north and central western part of the island. After the onset of the Spanish colonization of Cuba, a population of one hundred thousand was reduced to less than five thousand in the space of forty years, due primarily to epidemics, suicide, massacres, and homicide (Pérez de la Riva 24). The story of Camagüey in the novel can be a reference to the myths of Huatay and Guamá, two Taíno caciques who led resistances against early Spanish conquest. The figure of Huatay is mentioned in the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas and still remains today in the oral stories of indigenous communities in Cuba (Barreiro 35).

9 Like Avellaneda, María de la Mercedes de Santa-Cruz y Montalvo left Cuba for France at a young age, but returned to Cuba between 1840 and 1844, which she documents in her travel narrative, *Viaje a la Habana*. This work was published in Madrid in 1844 with a prologue written by Avellaneda, introducing the Countess to Spain and expressing her shared empathy on the question of geographic displacement and exile. For more on Santa-Cruz y Montalvo see Adriana Méndez Rodenas’s *Gender and Nationalism in Colonial Cuba: The Travels of Santa-Cruz y Montalvo, Condesa of Merlin*.

10 The first edition of *Sab* was printed in Madrid, *Imprenta calle del Barco* in two volumes. The second edition was printed in the periodical, *La América*, by Juan Ignacio de Armas in New York in nine installments, from May 15th to September 15th of 1871. The first publication of *Sab* in Cuba was printed in the magazine, *El Museo*, of Havana, in serial form in 1883 (Servera Intro, 88).

11 The image of Avellaneda as translator of a Cuban text, meaning her need to interpret the exotic landscape and traditions of her native country, recalls Sarmiento’s discourse of the Latin American intellectual as translator and importer of paradigms for modern progress. However, Avellaneda inverts Sarmiento’s model of the intellectual traveler; she does not attempt to import foreign models to Cuba, but instead imports and translates “unknown knowledge” for a foreign European audience.
12 Sarmiento wrote and published Civilización y Barbarie in the periodical El Progreso during his second exile in Chile (1845). Andres Bello published his Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida (1826) while exiled in London. José María Heredia writes from exile in Mexico, Cirilo Villaverde publishes Cecilia Valdés (1882) in New York during his political exile, and the great José Martí wrote much of his work outside of Cuba in Spain, Mexico, and the U.S.

WORKS CITED:


