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Antislavery Allegories of Cuba and the United States: the Novels of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Lydia Maria Child

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Literature protesting the abuses of slavery and promoting abolition had widespread influence and an international readership in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century. Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (U.S., 1852), for example, sold over one million copies and can be called "the most important book of the century" because of its tremendous impact (Tompkins 124). Stowe's novel became a reference point for a variety of later works, such as Clorinda Matto de Turner's Aves sin nido (Torn from the Nest; Peru, 1889) and Bernardo Guimarães's Escrava Isaura (The Slave Isaura; Brazil, 1875). Although it is perhaps the most frequently mentioned of the antislavery works of the nineteenth century, Uncle Tom's Cabin was certainly not the first or only work of its kind. Criticism of the cruelty of slavery in Europe's American colonies appears as early as 1522 with Bartolomé de Las Casas' plea to the royal court in Spain to end the forced labor of the indigenous population in the Caribbean in Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias (An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies; 1552). The use of the novel to protest against slavery of Africans and their descendents appears to date from 1688 with the publication of Aphra Behn's Oroonoko, in which the English writer recounts her experiences with slavery in Surinam. The production of literary opposition to slavery continued with increasing urgency until it was finally abolished in all countries in the Americas in the nineteenth century. Protests against forced labor, exploitation, and the lasting effects of racism continue to this day, as we see in works such as the autobiography Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (I, Rigoberta Menchú; 1983) and the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Thus, among the many social, cultural, and political impacts the wide-scale practice of slavery has had, an international body of literature with a common purpose is part of that institution's legacy in American countries.

Literary protests against slavery are typically studied within national and linguistic boundaries. Uncle Tom's Cabin has been extensively researched and has become a point of reference for many projects in antislavery literature, especially, but not exclusively, in those studies that focus on literature from the

United States. Regardless of the interest in Stowe's novel, however, relatively little comparative work in this area has been done despite recent growth in the area of inter-American studies. Through study of literary works opposing slavery and forced labor, the reader discovers that common threads run through these texts with regard to literary technique, narrative authority, and moral and political motivation. By developing an interpretive reading strategy that contributes to the areas of antislavery literature and of feminist reevaluation of nineteenth-century literature and that crosses national boundaries, the critic helps to open a dialogue between readers and critics from different cultural backgrounds and to add a new and important dimension to these literary conversations.

An effective reading strategy for approaching nineteenth-century antislavery works is inspired by Doris Sommer's analysis of Latin American literature as it is outlined in her influential study, Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America (1991). Sommer seeks out the complexity of works that have at times been dismissed as simplisitic because of a perceived lack in psychological depth or in complexity of narrative structure. In her reevaluation of nineteenth-century novels from Latin America, Sommer examines the allegorical content of what are typically star-crossed love stories as vehicles for national reconciliation. Through romance, these authors posited reconciliation of racial and social differences that divided the unstable young countries of Latin America just after achieving independence. Allegorical structure is traditionally understood as consisting of two parallel lines of meaning, one literal and one abstract. In other words, an allegory is understood to say one thing at the literal level but to mean something else at the abstract or metaphorical level. In contrast, Sommer describes the allegorical structure of the national romances of Latin America as consisting of the intersection of two lines. Romantic love, she argues, becomes a means of political agency in novels such as Jorge Isaacs's María and José Mármol's Amalia when personal and national interests overlap.

Despite the strength of Sommer's overall interpretations, a differing theory of allegory is more useful for the interpretation of nineteenth-century antislavery literature in particular. In The Ends of Allegory, Sayre S. Greenfield relies on the notion of allegorical structure as consisting of two levels of meaning but also characterizes allegory as an unstable and frequently collapsing construct. Greenfield proposes that the abstract, or metaphoric, content of an allegory relies on received belief systems for meaning and therefore is necessarily more conservative than the literal, or metonymic, layer of meaning. The two levels will thus strain against one another, particularly in the case of a radical, political allegory that proposes societal change at the literal level of meaning. Moreover, abstract representation cannot be consistently maintained throughout a literary work and will collapse into the literal layer, which accounts for the tensions and shifts in allegorical representations. Bearing in mind both Sommer's conception of nineteenth century novels from Latin America as part of nation-building projects and Greenfield's discussion of the instabilities of allegorical representation, I propose to analyze Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's antislavery novel, Sab (Cuba, 1841), and Lydia Maria Child's Reconstruction novel, A Romance of the Republic (US, 1867), as allegories that, while containing contradictory elements, nonetheless argue against slavery and racism in addition to offering a more inclusive redefinition of national identity.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, the author of Sab, was born and raised in Cuba when it was still a Spanish colony but lived most of her adult life in Spain (see Julia C. Paulk, "Allegory and Antislavery Literature of Latin America and the United States" for a more extensive study of both Gómez de Avellaneda and Child's novels). She actively sought a career as a writer at a time when Hispanic women

were discouraged from participating in the public sphere. Her first novel, Sab, was published in Spain in 1841, a mere five years after the author moved from the colony to the metropole. Because of her identity as a woman and origins as a colonial subject, critics tend to argue that Sab is not an antislavery novel but is instead either a vehicle for her feminist message (Kirkpatrick 156), or an argument in favor of independence for Cuba (Sommer 125). However, much of the text is overtly devoted to the criticism of both slavery and racism. The denunciation of bondage begins at the literal level of meaning and finds support at the metaphoric layer as the novel describes an allegorical vision promising a new age of equality for the oppressed. In her discussion of the traditional definition of allegory, theorist Carolynn Van Dyke concludes that allegories, rather than saying one thing and meaning another, actually say and mean one complex thing (27). Likewise, Gómez de Avellaneda's novel, Sab, is an antislavery novel that also opposes other forms of oppression, particularly that of women.

In Las Románticas: Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, Susan Kirkpatrick characterizes Sab as a feminist rather than as an antislavery novel. This argument is rather persuasively based on the unusual characterizations of the female characters in Gómez de Avellaneda's novel. The apparent heroine of the work, Carlota, at first appears to conform to the model of the angel of the home. Her innocence and virtue are repeatedly extolled, and she frequently appears dressed entirely in white. Like a true domestic angel, Carlota is utterly devoted to the notion of a happy marriage with her fiancé, Englishman Enrique Otway. However, by the conclusion of the novel, Carlota learns that her marriage is not based on affection but financial interest and is devastated by her disillusionment. The other central female character, Teresa, is also of particular interest to feminist scholars of Gómez de Avellaneda's novel. Teresa is an illegitimate member of the family who has been taken in as a charity case; by the conclusion of the novel, she seeks refuge in the convent. In one of the most striking moments of the novel, Teresa offers to run away with the title character, Sab, who is a mulatto and a slave, to unknown parts to live in freedom. Although she will not undergo the disillusionment of marriage as a financial exchange between two families, Teresa is smothered in the tomblike atmosphere of the convent. As this brief discussion of the two female characters indicates, the novel clearly promotes a feminist message in its strong critique of the possibilities available for women in nineteenth-century Cuba. However, to argue that the novel does not also contain a sincere protest against chattel slavery is to simplify both its message and its structure as an allegory.

The figure of Sab presents the primary argument against slavery in Gómez de Avellaneda's novel. As both critics and characters in the novel tend to point out, Sab is represented as being superior to other slaves. His physical appearance and special relationship to the family that owns him indicate that he is most likely the illegitimate offspring of Carlota's uncle and a female slave, and he is both educated and refined in his comportment. For a number of critics, the difference between Sab and the other slaves in the novel undermines the work's antislavery argument. However, all three of the main characters in the novel decry the practice of slavery, both with regard to Sab and other slaves. Carlota frees Sab and declares that she will free all of the family's slaves after she is married. Teresa is the first in the novel to recognize Sab's humanity when she offers to run away with him. Sab himself argues against the prevailing ideology of the day when he claims that slavery is an institution imposed by men; it does not conform either to God's laws or to the natural order of things. In the apocalyptic vision that he describes in his final letter to Teresa, Sab outlines a new society in which people are judged by intellect rather than by race.

Critics who describe Sab as a feminist or pro-independence novel value what they perceive to be the metaphoric level of meaning over the clear, literal argument against slavery that is contained in the novel. Sommer interprets Sab as a stand-in for the author herself who was held back by the limitations imposed upon women in the nineteenth century (114-116). Likewise, Kirkpatrick perceives the novel to be a proposal for the emancipation of women (156). Sommer additionally mentions the reception of the novel by nineteenth-century Cubans, particularly those who were living in exile because of their opposition to the island's colonial status. Sab's cries for freedom for all of God's creatures were understood to represent a call for liberation for one of Spain's final remaining colonies. Spanish authorities appear to have agreed with this interpretation; the novel was banned in Cuba. The romantic relationships suggested between Sab, Teresa, and Carlota suggest the possibility of uniting black and white Cuba, prefiguring José
Martí's declaration that black, mulatto, and white Cubans are all equally Cubans. While all of these are compelling readings of Gómez de Avellaneda's novel, none of the messages that may be contained at the metaphoric level of meaning need necessarily counteract the novel's explicit denunciation of slavery.

While Gómez de Avellaneda wrote only one novel dedicated to the problem of slavery, Lydia Maria Child was a life-long activist who protested racial oppression and slavery throughout her career. Early in her life as a writer, Child decried the abuses against the Native American population in the United States, particularly in her novel, Hobomok (1824); soon after this, she became a very visible member of the antislavery movement in the nineteenth century. She authored a number of short stories on this topic, but her most well-known and controversial work was a non-fiction attack on the practice of slavery, An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833). An Appeal was one of the earliest antislavery texts written by a woman in the United States, and the views the author expressed in opposition to slavery and racism were so radical that they cost Child almost all of her literary support and many of her friendships. Not only did this tract oppose the practice of slavery, it also condemned racism in the United States as a whole and proposed the immediate abolition of slavery and the incorporation of all former slaves into society as full and equal citizens. Because of her radical positions, Child suffered serious financial losses and all but disappeared as a writer until the 1940s, when the antislavery movement gained increased public support and Child again found an audience for her reformist literature.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the author was greatly concerned by President Andrew Johnson's efforts to block civil rights legislation for African-Americans and for the future of a country still divided by racism despite the abolition of slavery. Thus, she deliberately set out to compose a novel that would remind readers why the Civil War had been fought and help them envision a new way of life in the United States (Karcher 510). Because of its popular appeal, the form of the romantic novel seemed to be particularly suited to Child's purposes. The result of these efforts is A Romance of the Republic (1867), which relates the stories of two racially mixed sisters born into slavery but who eventually find happiness in marriage to white men.

The lives of the two primary characters in A Romance of the Republic initially serve to remind readers of the horrors of slavery and racism. Rosabella and Flora Royal are octoroon sisters raised as the well-to-do daughters of a white, New Orleans merchant. After their father's death, they discover that their mother was a slave and that neither she nor they were ever manumitted. The sisters believe that they are saved when Rosabella's suitor, Gerald Fitzgerald, marries her and takes the young ladies to a Georgia sea

island to live. However, the marriage is not legal, and Rosabella and Flora appear doomed to become tragic mulattos like those in other works of antislavery fiction, including Child's early short story "The Quadroons." However, in contrast to their forerunners, Rosabella and Flora both escape the sea island plantation and tragic fates. In a desperate maneuver, Rosabella switches her child with his legitimate halfbrother before she departs. Eventually, she marries a wealthy Bostonite, suggestively named Alfred Royal King, and Flora weds a German merchant, Franz Blumenthal, who also establishes himself in Boston. Rosabella's actual son is killed in the Civil War, and Alfred King adopts the child wrongly sent into slavery as a protégé. The novel ends with a series of living tableaux, or staged scenes, comprised of the sisters's multi-ethnic families and former slaves. The tableaux celebrate the conclusion of the Civil War and suggest a new vision of a multi-racial society in the United States, illustrating the novel's allegorization of national identity.

At the literal level of meaning in the novel, the girls escape slavery and find happiness in interracial marriages, which is a very unusual turn of events for a novel written in the United States in the nineteenth century. Rosa and Flora's relationships with their husbands are happier and more lasting than any of those that take place between white characters. However, the novel does recognize society's objections to mixed marriages on several occasions; this solution does not appear to work equally well for all the characters. For example, it becomes clear that young Gerald Fitzgerald and his visibly mulatto wife, Henriet, will not be able to stay in the United States. A mob threatens to riot near their home in New Rochelle because neighbors object to their union, and the couple must relocate to Europe to avoid violence.

When Child set out to write A Romance of the Republic, she clearly had in mind the idea of writing a work that would reflect or comment upon her nation and suggest ways for a divided nation to heal itself. Curiously, however, the few studies that exist of Child's novel do not address it as a national allegory despite the benefits to interpretation this approach allows. The closest other analyses come to an allegorical reading is to refer to marriage in the novel as a "symbol of reconciliation" or a "metaphor for the union of ethnic groups, classes, and cultures" (Karcher 511). As a national allegory, Child's novel is not simply the story of two exceptional slaves who marry well but a solution for healing the divisions in the United States between oppressors and oppressed. In an allegorical interpretation, Rosabella and Flora, whom contemporary readers criticize for appearing too white, become representatives of all the disenfranchised. Even though the laws of the land did not recognize them as such in the 1860s, in Child's novel, former slaves become true members of the American family. Although the incorporation of Rosabella, Flora, and their children comes close to suggesting the assimilation process referred to as "whitening" in discussions of Latin American literature, the author does her best to leave the reader with a picture of a pluralistic society at the novel's conclusion. After the men have returned home victorious from fighting in the Civil War, the other family members stage a series of living tableaux that suggest a multi-ethnic national identity:

Under festoons of the American flag, surmounted by the eagle, stood Eulalia, in ribbons of red, white, and blue, with a circle of stars round her head. One hand upheld the shield of the Union, and in the other the scales of Justice were evenly poised. By her side stood Rosen Blumen, holding in one hand a gilded pole surmounted by a liberty-cap, while her other hand rested protectingly on the head of Tulee's Benny, who was kneeling and looking upward in thanksgiving. (Child, Romance 440)

As the novel concludes, the Kings and the Blumenthals unite in song: “All the family, of all ages and colors, then joined in singing “The Star-spangled Banner” (441). Thus, the final image of the novel is one of familial harmony and racial inclusiveness.

Because much of her career was dedicated to protest against the treatment of Native Americans and of African-Americans in the United States, Child is not accused, as is Gómez de Avellaneda, of being more interested in women’s issues than in the plight of slaves or people of color. Rather, despite her concern for women’s rights, Child is taken to task by contemporary critics for suggesting marriage as the model of national integration. As critic Carolyn Karcher explains, marriage was not an egalitarian institution in the US in the nineteenth century (511). Moreover, the novel is also perceived as perpetuating a color-based social hierarchy. However, the context in which this novel was written must again be considered. As Karcher herself points out, Child’s novel is unique among nineteenth-century novels from the United States in suggesting marriage as a means of bringing about an end to racial discrimination (First Woman 514). One must further add that Child was very much aware of issues related to public reception of her work. She intended to write a romance that would persuade a reluctant general populace to accept racial integration; the happy marriages that conclude her novel conform to the conventions of romance and most likely appealed to popular taste at the time that the work was published. Further, by providing a happy ending to the mixed marriages in A Romance of the Republic, Child is rewriting the tragic conclusions to interracial romance found in most antislavery novels, including Sab and Child’s earlier works, Hobomok and “The Quadroons”.

Although the two works studied here, Sab and A Romance of the Republic, may not be entirely consistent in their protests against oppression and abuse, they nonetheless reflect sincere efforts by their respective authors to protest the root causes of slavery, racism and economic exploitation. In suggesting a new model for society by way of the microcosm of the family and romantic love, each novel proposes a more inclusive and harmonious national identity. Each of the two authors is criticized today for placing other interests ahead of those of greatest concern to the enslaved and exploited, yet a look at the continuing racial problems in the Americas in the twenty-first century indicates that both Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Lydia Maria Child were well ahead of their time in their quest for a more just society.

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