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Manzano’s Zafira and the Performance of Cuban Nationhood

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Domingo del Monte’s tertulia, which sought to define Cuban nationalism through literary imaginings, exemplifies Benedict Anderson’s belief that the formation of nations is an act of collective will disseminated largely through the medium of writing (73). But the group’s white Creole invention of nation was a truncated one that entertained in limited and generally figurative terms the direct participation of Cuba’s majority population of color, even within the antislavery narratives it so vigorously cultivated. Despite his periodic mimicry of European models and efforts to placate the tertulia’s white readership, Juan Francisco Manzano was engaging in an aesthetic—and political—dialogue with Enlightenment values and ideas of nation that were rather autonomous of white Creole designs. In his last major published work, and his only drama, Zafira: tragedia en cinco actos (Havana, 1842), Manzano responds to Creole literary fantasies of miscegenation as well as Hispanic literary traditions of colonization and delivers his own formula for sovereignty in Cuba, which I suggest holds obscured reference to the 1791 slave revolt of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) and the subsequent establishment of a black republic there in 1804.

Late eighteenth-century enlightened, liberal philosophy transformed the

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political landscape of Europe and sparked successful independence movements in much of Latin America. But nineteenth-century Cuba was characterized by fear and repression, tight censorship, and overt persecution. A series of factors on the island contributed to this continued squelching of autonomy, including what even Simón Bolívar had recognized as a tendency of the white population to remain loyal to the Spanish crown: “Although a handful of progressive individuals favoured independence from Spain, Cuba’s economic elite was conservative, fearful of the economic and social consequences of a break with the colonial motherland” (Gott 52). Meanwhile, in Cuba and elsewhere in the Americas, slavery continued to exist in stark contradiction to the values of freedom and equality championed in new and restructured societies. The British impulse towards abolition resulted in its own legal termination of the slave trade, but Spain refused to discontinue its involvement in the practice, despite signing a treaty with Britain in 1817 to do so by 1820 (Gott 59). Moreover, although Spain passed a reformist constitution in 1836 for its own population, it denied the right of Cuba to participate in those reforms, expelled Cuban representatives from the Cortes in 1837, and determined instead that the island would be governed by special rules (Fischer 102).

While colonies and new nations in the Americas scrambled to find ways to justify the persistence of slavery in an age that made claims to human equality by birth, Haiti stood as a singular example of black freedom and political self-determination. Its existence in the midst of myriad slaveholding territories was unsettling at best. The slave revolt in Saint Domingue had pushed thousands of wealthy land and slave owners first into Spanish-held Santo Domingo and then into Cuba, bringing with them not only bloody stories of black rebellion that terrified Cuban owners, but also some of their own slaves. Cuba had tried repeatedly to prevent “French” slaves from entering the island in an attempt to prevent the events of Haiti from repeating themselves there. Cuba had suffered its own slave rebellions, which became increasingly frequent in the early nineteenth century. It is difficult to say how many of those were directly influenced by the events in Haiti (Gaspar and Geggus 4–5, 13–18). But in white minds, the connection was presumed, and this perpetual fear of slave agency, along with concerns about Creoles seeking

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1. See also Geggus’ chapter “Slave Resistance in the Spanish Caribbean in the Mid-1790s” in the same text (131–55) as well as his book The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World.
independence determined the repressive character of a series of Cuban govern-ernorships like that of Francisco Dionisio Vives (1823–1832) and General Mi-guel Tacón Rosique (1834–38): “Éste, que había apurado la hiel de la derrota en Sur América, trajo con sus amargos rencores la firme determinación de estirpar con mano dura todo germén de liberalismo para evitar posibles sedi-ciones. Corolario ineludible de gobiernos como el de Tacón y sus sucesores es la estricta censura de la prensa y del teatro” (Arrom 47). \(^2\) While many Creoles certainly aspired to increased political autonomy, they were aware of the slave population’s own designs on freedom, and they feared this eventu-ality. White Cubans thus found themselves in a quandary: aspirations for sovereignty stood in direct conflict with the need for Spanish military might that could control black rebellion and subjectivity on the island (Vera-León 16; Fischer 117). Meanwhile, the free population of color stood in a frighten-ingly arbitrary position. While in many instances free Cubans of color might align with white Creoles in the maintenance of black repression and the pro-tection of their own interests, they were just as likely to sympathize with slave rebellions, at times taking the lead as organizers and participants. When Manzano wrote Zafira, he was a free man and had been since 1836, when the Del Monte group had collected sufficient money to purchase his freedom.\(^3\) Several critics have argued that, once free, Manzano was no longer of political or literary interest to the tertulia members because he could not represent the sympathetic, symbolic slave that would forward progressives’ agenda for reform or its debatable inclinations towards the abolition of slav-ery.\(^4\) The Creole national project provided no space for black intellectualism,
and any autonomous political expression arising from Manzano’s free status would have been quickly dismissed: “El futuro de Manzano como intelectual es impensable bajo la concepción del negro que reproduce el discurso abolicionista letrado” (Draper 15. See also Labrador-Rodríguez 22–23, Miller 424). This may be related to what some view as Manzano’s virtual creative silence following freedom.5 Though Manzano may now have been relegated to only marginal importance for the Del Monte tertulia, he was nonetheless participating in the literary nationalism of the nineteenth century with Zafira, which speaks in allegory about colonialism and slavery in Cuba (Jackson, Black Writers 34). What distinguishes Zafira is its African context, unique creation of characters, and linguistic allusions that point to other political impulses quite independent of Creole interests, as we shall see.

Zafira takes place in a sixteenth-century North African Muslim kingdom in Mauritania/Argel usurped by Turkish interlopers. Set in the palace of Arabian king Selim Eutemi, the play opens with the princess Zafira as she mourns her dead husband to her confidante Colifa and laments her approaching nuptials with Barbarroja, the Turkish pirate who seeks to consolidate his extensive tyrannical power on the North African coasts by making Zafira his wife.6 Eutemi, murdered in the baths some ten years ago, now visits Zafira in dreams, inviting her to join him in the world of the dead. Eutemi menaces Zafira, telling her that she should make the ultimate sacrifice of death for her people to prevent the kingdom from falling into Barbarroja’s hands:

Busca en la sombra del sepulcro helado
Un asilo feliz: libra a tu patria
Del perpetuo baldón que lleva al cabo.
Pues si cómplice de su destino

of the black race on the island, even if through a gradual miscegenation via white immigration, is revealing of what he might have felt about abolishing slavery (Fischer 113).

5. Friol insists that Manzano did in fact continue to write: “Pretendiendo establecer una especiosa ecuación (libertad = muerte del lírico), la crítica ha hecho hincapié sobre el silencio poético de Manzano a partir de 1836. Ello es inexacto. Manzano continuó escribiendo poemas por lo menos hasta 1843” (62).

6. Aruch Barbarroja (1473–1518) was a Turkish pirate who battled Spanish forces on the northern coasts of Africa, defeating them numerous times and ruling cities like Tunis and Algiers. He was one of three brothers, two of whom were known as Barbarroja. Friol provides a historical summary (70–71).
Por sobre todo pasas ansiando
Un mejor porvenir, témelo todo. (1. 2. 105)

Tension increases when Selim Jr., the prince who was spirited away to safety in the wake of his father’s murder, returns to the palace disguised as an Asian noble, seeking vengeance. For ten years, Selim has lived a life of exile, orphanhood, and solitude, but he has no doubts about his true homeland:

Soy extranjero, sí; pero mis cuitas
Aquí su negro origen principiaron;
Y aquí, por fin, me colmarán de alivio
Mi oculto padecer a luz sacando.
Sabed: que mi linaje es hoy tan limpio
Como un rayo del Sol, como el sol claro . . . (1. 5. 115)

With a single exception, at first no one realizes that the newcomer is Selim, not even his own mother. Significantly, it is Noemí, a black eunuch slave of the palace, who immediately recognizes the prince:

NOEMÍ: Le conozco
Oíd señor.
SÉLIM: ¿Qué quieres?
NOEMÍ: Libertaros . . .
Yo os conozco, a fe mía: van dos lustros
Que de una noche en el espeso manto,
Os salvaron de aquí, y aquel turbante
En vuestra joven frente colocado . . . (1.6. 117)

Thus the tension of Zafira begins in the first act, with Selim in clandestine alliance with Noemí and other colluding characters, poised to challenge the illegal reign of Barbarroja. One imagines the appearance of Zafira in Havana in the 1840s, and its performance of tyranny, exile, subjugation, slavery, and rebellion become charged with the weight of Spanish colonialism on the island. Is it possible, however, that Manzano hoped to incite an anti-colonial, anti-slavery revolution through the performance of allegory? How could such a text escape the intense scrutiny of colonial authorities? Or, as Marilyn Miller suggests, was this drama merely a creative foray into orientalism and
the literary musings of nationalism as were so many other nineteenth-century texts ("’Tengo’")?

Contemporary critics have pointed out the nationalistic facets of Manzano’s writing, although their focus has been less the explicit thematics of his work than the use of language, either as a marker of identity or as a means to establish a juridical self as a citizen within the emerging nation. Vera-León, for example, believes that Manzano’s vernacular/oral style of writing and vocabulary suited the objectives of the nineteenth-century Creole project of writing the Cuban nation by including its “barbarous” or autochthonous and oral linguistic complexities. He sees the style of the autobiography as occupying a hybrid or interstitial written space where Creole aspirations for national sovereignty meet Manzano’s own designs for freedom (freedom from slavery and freedom of expression): “En el estilo de Manzano se puede leer una trama doble: la personal de Manzano hacia la escritura y la libertad, y la trama de los intelectuales” (14). Ramos agrees that the national narrative sought to resolve conflicts of linguistic heterogeneity in Cuba (“Cuerpo” 231–32). But he also emphasizes the written word’s sanctioned power and capacity for violence and views the act of writing by Manzano as a departure away from forced containment within his own body as a slave who is beaten and tortured, and a movement into the juridical world of the legal body (and mind) of the national citizen (“Cuerpo” 226–27 “La ley” 312–13, 317). Parallel to Molloy’s assertion that Manzano creates a self via the medium of writing, Ramos locates in Manzano’s autobiography a direct confrontation of the legal corpus that supports slavery and a simultaneous construction of a national subjectivity, or “la constitución de un nuevo sujeto que en el acto mismo de contar su verdad proyecta la constitución de la ciudadanía futura” (311). Similarly, Labrador-Rodríguez points out that Manzano’s efforts towards increased literacy while a slave were consistently met by whites with punishment, a reality brought into relief by Rama’s assertion that it was the labor of indigenous peoples and black slaves that created an accumulated wealth in Spanish America that allowed Spaniards and Creole whites free time to dedicate solely to the production and management of writing in the colonial period (Labrador-Rodríguez 20–22; Rama 27, 41). This juridical monopoly in turn was wielded in the form of an apparatus of ordinances, penal codes, et cetera., that functioned to oppress the black body and to exclude “other” participation from the privileged sphere of writing. Manzano’s irruption into this realm of letters thus grants him access to a power of creation that is not only aesthetic, but also political and legal.
Recent criticism on Manzano evidences his intellectual aptitude and dexterity with language as he strives to overcome the dialectic of slave/owner, body/reason and create a self in his writing that is distinct from that of other blacks because he is educated: that is, because he is able to write and is also aesthetically sensitive. Labrador-Rodríguez insists that he is careful to take into consideration the expectations of his audience, employing calculated discursive strategies to distance himself from black slaves, not because he wishes to be more white, but rather because he chooses to represent himself as a unique individual that is sympathetic to his audience: “El narrador sustituye la imagen del negro esclavo por un ser inteligente y sensible que es víctima de la arbitrariedad y del destino” (19). Once inside the lettered circle, Manzano employs these types of alternative strategies “para complacer y al mismo tiempo subvertir el orden del discurso antiesclavista” (22). Indeed, both Miller and Labrador-Rodríguez posit that the autobiography serves as a sort of passport into society’s recognition of him as a writer, an exercise that is far below his intellectual capabilities, but one that will allow him to fulfill the objective of his life: to write and to live a life of the mind. All of the critics, however, who explore the body/intellect dichotomy in the autobiography recognize that while Manzano’s tortured or suffering body served Creole reformist objectives, his intellectual autonomy was a threat to an established social order, and so was squelched as much as possible. What was perceived as the anomalous combination of his skin color and his literate intellect was socially destabilizing: “Es precisamente esta ambigüedad la que para mí explica que su saber se convierta en algo potencialmente peligroso para los blancos, tanto criollos como peninsulares” (Labrador-Rodríguez 23).

I would argue that despite the complications that his new status implied, freedom nourished Manzano’s potential for a more complete expression of intellectual self. Once granted formal access to the written word and released from aesthetic servitude to a patronage that held the key to his legal status as a free man, he was able to include his political beliefs in his creativity, which he does in Zafira. Here, sensitive always to the strict parameters of censored expression, he offers his sentiments regarding personal and national sovereignty to the perceptive reader. As far as we know, Zafira was never staged as

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7. Vera-León sees Manzano’s text as one characterized by dual motivations and verbal expressions (6). Draper, Labrador-Rodríguez, Miller (“Rebelión narrativa”), and Molloy all examine the flux between the dichotomies of slave and free man and body and mind in Manzano’s autobiography.
a theatrical production, but the play still received a space of virtual performance in print. At a time when dramas had to be read and officially approved for publication by censors, Manzano applied for permission to publish the play and, one month later, permission was granted (Friol 68). Several Havana newspapers, such as the Noticioso y Lucero de la Habana, announced the opening of the subscription to the drama at the press of D. Lorenzo Mier y Teran, garnering for the play a public of more than three hundred readers who had prepaid to fund the printing (Friol 67–68). Through the publication of Zafira, Manzano was able to communicate with an audience within the capital who already had an emerging sense of national consciousness, some of whom must have shared the concerns voiced in Zafira, including the anti-slavery sentiments. (Others may not have, as his patrons also included his previous owners. Thus it could be argued that even in the publishing of this last work, he was not entirely free from the desire to appeal to a white audience.)

Like his poetry and well-known autobiography, Manzano’s only drama is grounded in the formal aesthetics as well as the intellectual and political values of the Enlightenment: reason, order, justice, a longing for equality. As a five-act drama written in hendecasyllabic assonant verse, or romance heroico, the play’s structure and language reflect turn of the century formal sensibility. Consistent with Neoclassical structure, it maintains unity of time and place, occurring in a palace over the course of one day. However, also similar to his other writings, Zafira is immersed in the melodrama, exoticism, drive for freedom, and emotional energy proper to Spanish American romanticism (Miller, “Tengo”). That the drama is allegorical should begin to be clear from the start of the play when Zafira utters “Que prefija el deber a un soberano / Cuando la patria pide que su sangre / Por salvarla derrame en holocausto” (1. 2. 102), the words “soberano” and “patria” are already charged with Enlightenment value and are suggestive of the Cuban context. In fact, lexicon is crucial to situating the “real” moment of Manzano’s dia-

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8. It is very likely that the play was professionally proofread for errors and edited accordingly. There have been queries by colleagues if perhaps someone else might have had a hand in the writing of Zafira. Until evidence of such collaboration is uncovered, I will stand by the single authorship of Manzano as it was publicized in 1842. I fear that doing otherwise undermines yet again his capacities as a writer. The dissimilitude between the language of Manzano’s poetry and autobiography is evident. The verse in this play, while it more closely resembles that of his poetry, is more polished than both prior registers, as is to be expected with Manzano’s developing literacy and thus does not necessarily imply another hand in the writing of the drama.
chronic play, which includes words like “deber de humanidad,” “despatriado,” “derechos,” and “pública asamblea.” But, if it is clear to a reader of the twenty-first century that Zafira was a thinly masked criticism of the tyranny of Spaniards in Cuba, and not Turks in Argel, how was it not apparent in the 1840s at a time of heightened suspicion of treason and conspiracy? The reason is perhaps that it was too familiar—in form and content—to raise sufficient concern. This is because the source of the Cuban’s drama is thoroughly Hispanic. Herein lies the genius of Manzano’s theatrical move.

The Other Zafira

Dramas about Moors and Christians, as well as Turks and captives in faraway lands and distant times, appealed to both Neoclassical and Romantic sensibilities in early nineteenth-century Spain and Cuba alike. It is possible that Manzano found his inspiration in a collection of contemporary Spanish plays, perhaps lent to him by one of the members of the Del Monte tertulia, who were known to share their own creative writing as well as their libraries. One way or another, Manzano came across the written text that is undoubtedly the source with which he dialogues in his own Zafira: another five-act Zafira published around 1800 in Barcelona at the press of Carlos Gibért y Tutó, a printer and bookseller. The play, to which I will refer from now on as the Spanish Zafira, is also written in romance heroico and carries the title Tragedia. Zafira: en cinco actos, annotated with “N. 93,” can be found as play number 10 in volume 7 of Teatro Antiguo (Español) Borrás. Unfortunately, neither the play itself nor the volume of dramas in which it is contained identifies an author, and I have not as yet been able to determine who the author might have been.

With this earlier Spanish Zafira in hand, it becomes clear that Manzano’s dramatic project was one of contestation. Just as it had been common for Golden Age authors to engage each other’s works, it was equally common for Neoclassical and Romantic writers to take up prior texts and rework them to be consistent with the aesthetic and political climate. Arrom points out that many Cuban playwrights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

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9. See Carrasco Urgoiti’s El moro de Granada en la literatura (del siglo XV al XX), Fothergill-Payne, and Anderson regarding the long history of Moors, Christians, captives, and Turks in the Hispanic tradition. See also Friol regarding Cuba (69–71).
would take popular Spanish works and “Cubanize” them, incorporating local dialect and types: “Este género, que en Cuba se conoce como criollo, típico o vernáculo, tiene una historia tan antigua como el teatro español mismo” (Arrom 36). Given the predilection for intertextual dialogue and imitation, it is possible that the Spanish Zafira of 1800 is not “original” either. More likely, other Zafiras appear in plays, novels or romances that precede it. Held next to each other, though, the structural and thematic parallels between the Cuban Zafira and the 1800 Spanish Zafira suggest that the 1800 version was very likely the one with which Manzano was in dialogue.

The setting and time of the two Zafiras are the same, and the events of the two plays and the characters diverge only slightly (Zafira and her confidante, the prince Selim, and Barbarroja all appear); but the tones of those events and the natures of the characters are transformed. Most interesting are the ways in which a drama of Spanish imperialism is turned into a Cuban play of emerging nationhood. In the Spanish Neoclassical version (1800), Celinda (the confidante) urges Zafira to call upon the brave and honorable Spanish to help her vanquish Barbarroja: “que quando el Español rige la espada / estimula sus bélicos alientos / el honor, la opinión, el timbre y fama” (2. 1. 7). It is the Spanish Commander who arises as the true hero of the earlier play, making pronouncements such as:

El valiente Español, (que el que en España nace, ya se acredita de valiente)
    quando espera la lid, el triunfo aguarda;
    que un corazón en donde resplandecen
    religión, amor regio y patriotismo,
    es vencido jamás, triunfante siempre. (2. 5. 11)

And in the end, when Barbarroja has been slain by none other than the Commander, Zafira delivers her kingdom to Spain and the sacred empire (5. 4. 24).

The Spanish Commander, however, does not exist in Manzano’s play, and one can easily see why Manzano would wipe him out altogether and replace

10. According to Arrom, popular actor and playwright Francisco Covarrubias was a master of this reformulation of Spanish works: “Covarrubias, con un sentido certero de su arte, cambia el ambiente de estas piezas y transforma a payos, chulos y toreros en tipos criollos como monteros, carreteros y peones de tierra adentro” (36).
him with Noemí, the palace slave. Noemí is Manzano’s true hero behind the scenes, standing in for the enslaved people of African descent in Cuba who will conspire with Selim (“Venid comigo / Donde con libertad hablaros pueda”) and act in rebellion when the moment is ripe. It is Noemí who recognizes Selim in the palace, and it is he who offers him freedom, despite the self-endangerment it implies (“SELIM: ¿Qué quieres? NOEMÍ: Liber-taros.”) Selim tries to offer Noemí money in payment for his helping him, but Noemí refuses, telling him to save it for those whose alliances can be bought:

Selim: ¿No eres esclavo?

Noemí: Soy superior en todo a la fortuna,
Mas tesoro no quiero, yo la canto
Según la encuentro, próspera, o adversa. (I. 6. 117)

It is only proper that Manzano would take the symbolic act of justice away from the Spaniard and put Barbarroja’s head (read: the Spaniard’s head) into the hands of Noemí, the character who is granted the privileged act of slaying the usurping tyrant by beheading him. The Spanish captain, on the other hand, is given only two lines in Manzano’s play, one spoken just as Selim and Barbarroja are to battle: “Nuestra jornada príncipe cumplimos / Y a España regresarnos deberemos” (5. 6. 185)

The creation of a national discourse founds itself on antiquity, seeking to emphasize what is seemingly timeless in its origins (B. Anderson 11–12). In the Americas, where newness and historical youth form an integral part of national existence, there exists nonetheless an active reverence for what is ancient in that consciousness: indigenous roots, African ancestors, European traditions, et cetera. This is the need that nation has for pastness, as Wallerstein would say (78). Manzano locates pastness or rootedness for Cuba’s national beginnings in the Hispanic literary tradition, yet there is a simultaneous uprooting of tradition at hand. This is the core of hybridity, mimicry, and the “writing back” exemplified by the Cubanization of Spanish texts that Arrom signals. Henry Louis Gates points out this manipulation of the signifier as a central element of African-American writing. In strategies of resistance in writing, meaning directed toward the complicit audience is carefully couched in a signifier that appears harmless, when in fact it is charged with complex and doubled references: “The Monkey’s trick of Signification has been to convince the hapless Lion that he has spoken literally, when all along
he has spoken figuratively” (57).\footnote{Ramos and Vera-León (6) both point to Manzano’s tendency towards mimesis and mimicry in the process of learning to write and developing his talents as a writer. Ramos makes the important point that in Manzano, “the mirror was not passive” (“La ley” 319–20.) Ramírez also points out that sectors aspiring to the power of writing would often imitate formal registers of writing (49–50).} Antonio Vera-León also posits that Manzano’s autobiography is one that opposes tradition, rules and canon. In its use of vernacular and misspellings, “Manzano no escribe en oposición a un canon autóctono, nacional, sino metropolitano español. ésta es una de las condiciones que más interés dan a su escritura que aunque menor, antimetropolitana y antiesclavista, contribuyó sin embargo a la formación de un canon nacional cubano” (8). Through Zafira, Manzano clearly writes in opposition to the metropolis, but the play brings into relief tensions with the Creole national project as well, because while Manzano’s project is one of verbal obfuscation and ambivalence that operates between metropolis and colony, it also oscillates between political objectives generally defined according to race.

Cuba’s independence from Spain and the abolition of slavery were two distinct impulses on the island that only rarely overlapped during the first decades of the nineteenth century. As I pointed out above, many white Creoles found themselves in the rather paradoxical position of desiring greater political autonomy for themselves but living in perpetual fear of the black slave potential for uprising. The census of 1841 had confirmed the numerical dominance that whites had feared: “Cuba’s total population of just over one million included 418,000 whites, 436,000 slaves and 153,000 free people of color” (Gott 66). Thus, any impetus for sovereignty was often put in check by the need to maintain Spanish military might on the island to quell black slave unrest (Gott 52–53, 59; Fischer 117). Equally appealing to Cuban landowning whites was the free labor of slavery that provided them comfortable prosperity. Spain was aware of the weaknesses of Cuban colonials (fear of black subjectivity and desire for profit) and used them to its advantage to hold ideological sway on the island. Black slaves, on the other hand, were motivated by emancipation from servitude above all other objectives, although some slave revolts were revolutionary in nature and promoted a release from colonial tyranny and the extension of French revolutionary ideals to all citizens. Nevertheless, referring to the 1840s, Gott states a general truth about the time period in succinct terms: “It was possible to mobilize the
whites for independence, and the blacks for an end to slavery, but it was not possible to get them to work together. The whites were frightened of ending slavery, and the blacks were not overly concerned about independence” (66–67).

Whether reformist or abolitionist, the Del Monte tertulia did create a progressive literary space to serve as a medium to promote Cuban nationalism. Here, the Cuban antislavery novel experimented, albeit in figurative and metaphorical terms, with the approximation of disparate racial and economic groups. Sybille Fischer delineates two fantasies of the Cuban antislavery novel that arose within this national literary project: the figure of the submissive slave and the trope of incest. She suggests that the first was offered as compensation to a Cuban readership that might not be amenable to abolition or even entertain tolerance for slaves with historical subjectivity: “The stories offer a particularly protective fantasy that forecloses a knowledge that in the ideology of slavery is part of the structure of disavowal: the slave is dangerous” (119). And according to Fischer, the more dangerous the slave was imagined to be, the less likely that white Cubans could fathom an autonomous reality without Spanish military presence (117). The second tendency of the antislavery narrative to create incestuous love scenarios, such as that between Cecilia and Leonardo in Cecilia Valdés, is one Fischer sees as a search for sameness by collapsing “excessive difference” into “dangerous closeness” (124). The demystification of such mutual acceptance of difference at the end of these novels, however, is that the Other is really not Other at all (e.g. Cecilia is Leonardo’s sister, not any mulatta woman): “The fantasy of incest allows the reader to avoid a constellation in which mutual recognition across the dividing lines of color and race would be the natural conclusion. The incest story offers a scenario in which the radical alternative to the colonial slaveholding system remains veiled” (128). That is to say, the exploration of national love and cross-racial mixing is abruptly truncated at the tragic revelation of incest, in Fischer’s view.

Manzano takes up both of these fantasies of the Cuban antislavery narrative in Zafira, but according to his own political designs. Noemí, it should be recalled, is Manzano’s eunuch slave character that replaces the heroic Spanish Commander from the 1800 Spanish version of the play. Because Noemí carries symbolic import as the masses of oppressed black slaves in Cuba, his emasculation could be read as a means by which Manzano diminishes the slave’s dangerous potential for virility and the masculine act of revolt, feared by whites as both literal and figurative desecration of whiteness. Transgres-
sion of the bounds of subjugation and the loss of white control over racial mixing were concerns often articulated through a privileging of the white woman’s body, a violation of which would result in miscegenation through a “forced” and unnatural process. Perhaps Manzano responds to white fears of black subjectivity and virility by physically emasculating Noemí, but Noemí is by no means a passive or submissive slave. He is, rather, made more intensely virile through the wielding of his bow, arrow, and sword: when Selim is to be put to death by Barbarroja’s executioner in act 4, Noemí kills him with a single arrow shot from his bow and then valiantly guards the door as Selim and his companions escape the palace unharmed. And in the final act it is Noemí who slays Barbarroja, appearing on stage with the bloodied executioner’s sword he has used in one hand and the severed head of the tyrant in the other. Clearly, the rebellious subjectivity of the only slave in the play is not diminished, but rather enhanced by both the symbolic phallus he wields and the significant role he is assigned in establishing legitimate rule.

Manzano handles the incest trope uniquely as well. While in the earlier Spanish version of the play Celinda (Colifa in the Cuban drama) serves as a love interest for Selim, there is no exogamous love interest in Manzano’s play, as all love flows to the mother, who represents the nation. Moreover, all love and desire converge in an African “nation,” suggesting a valorization of Africanness in the Cuban parallel. Selim, in Oedipal implications, must slay the man who seeks to wed Zafira in order to possess both her body and her kingdom. Outsiders, those beyond this closed African family and kingdom, in fact have no place within it: Barbarroja is killed and the Turks expelled; the Spaniards retreat quietly once Selim’s power has been reaffirmed. In the absence of the King, there is only space for love between Selim and his mother. Yet Selim’s filial adoration is staunched: here, too, incestuous impulse is denied because Zafira kills herself in the belief that her son has perished in the duel with Barbarroja. Subsequently, Selim refuses to assume the throne, lamenting the blood spilled to restore rightful rule. Thus, while the Cuban antislavery novel exhibits an unconscious desire for sameness on the part of the characters, between the characters in Manzano’s play the affinity for sameness is explicit and exclusive.12

12. I find the themes of incestuous love and submissive versus virile slave to be intricately linked in Manzano. Kutzinski’s Sugar’s Secrets points to the sensualization of the mulatta woman by white desire (for the sign of whitening she bears), which casts the black man entirely out of the realm of unifying erotics. He is emasculated and denationalized at the same time. Manzano’s Noemí is physically emasculated, but he is fully invited into the sphere of liberation and national-
Establishment of rightful African rule and the simultaneous rejection of a monarchic model, combined with the undermining of a metaphor for national conciliatory miscegenation in Manzano’s play, lead to my suggestion that Zafira was written in obfuscated dialogue with the Haitian ideal of revolutionary antislavery. Both Labrador-Rodríguez and Jackson have stated that Manzano’s writing reveals the seeds of black Cuban intellectualism. Jackson sees Manzano’s repeated use of the word “black” in Zafira, however, with negative connotations, evidence of the author’s incorporation of blackness as a malign quality inherited from European tradition: “Even this historical brainwashing can be seen in Manzano’s Zafira where the author makes repeated references, for example, to black signs, black origin, black toil, black hurricanes, black tempest, black cloak, the blackest treason, and black slander” (Jackson, “Slavery, Racism and Autobiography” 35). I believe, however, that while some images are merely aesthetic expression, blackness is more frequently functioning within a metaphorical system of secrecy, clandestine collaboration, and revolt, one in which slaves are key participants. The hurricane is coming in the form of revolution and, throughout the play, Manzano uses this very Caribbean image, incongruent as it is to a North African context, to convey the building of the coming social transformation. Manzano’s “negros huracanes” echo Heredia’s 1825 poem “En una tempestad: Al huracán” written from exile, in which the poet celebrates the natural beauty of the storm but also signals obvious connotations of political change. Manzano was no doubt aware of Heredia’s exile to the US in 1823 for his implication in the Conspiración de los Soles y Rayos de Bolívar (Conspiracy of the Suns and Rays of Bolivar) in Havana as a member of the “Caballeros Racionales” (or Rational Gentlemen). This is the origin, in obfuscated language, of the verse cited earlier in this essay when Selim foreshadows the revelation of his identity:

ifying activities. Moreover, despite white paranoid fears of the violation of white women by black men, it is in fact black women who more frequently suffered rape by white men, and their bodies thus functioned as the medium for miscegenation. It is understandable, then, that Selim would act to protect and shelter Zafira’s body from abuses of power (something Manzano would certainly have liked to do for his mother when he witnessed her being beaten).

13. In his book Winds of Change, Pérez points to the image of the hurricane not only as a timeless image of national identity and unity, but also as an impressive force of social and economic transformation (see his references to literary usages [147–55]). The brutal hurricanes of the 1840s, for example, shifted agricultural production away from coffee and towards sugar, which presented a much harsher existence for black slaves in Cuba.
Y aqui, por fin, me colmarán de alivio
Mi oculto padecer a luz sacando.
Sabed: que mi linaje es hoy tan limpio
Como un rayo del Sol, como el sol claro . . . (1. 5. 115)

The “rayo del Sol” to which he refers is a (not so) subtle reference to the Soles y Rayos de Bolívar and Manzano’s linking of Selim to gestures of emancipation in Cuba.

This type of hidden allusion and the importance of clandestine cooperation dominate Manzano’s Zafira, though it does not appear in the 1800 version. Manzano’s Selim arrives on the stage in disguise (as an Asian noble), which is certainly intended to create dramatic intrigue, but which also obliges him to conspire with only loyal parties until he can solidify a viable plot against Barbarroja. Clearly, the central character in solidarity is Noemí:

Selim: ¿Y qué exiges de mí?
Noemí: Venid conmigo
Donde con libertad hablaros pueda. (2. 12. 140)

While it was dangerous to allude to plans for independence in a literary or dramatic work, it could be deadly to make reference to abolition of slavery and suggest black self-determination in Cuba. Yet I feel that this is precisely what Manzano does throughout this allegorical play, despite his knowledge of this lethal reality. Haiti and its lessons are here, though they lie buried just a level deeper than calls for Cuban sovereignty. In her book Modernity Disavowed, Sybille Fischer addresses the complexity of determining the influence of Saint Domingue/Haiti on black Caribbeans because they constituted a population that communicated via oral traditions. Fischer insists that Rama’s idea of the lettered city and the transmission of power through writing is of little relevance when seeking evidence of Haitian influence. Rumor, song, news passed from mouth to mouth, port to port, and images and icons all carried important significances for black slaves and Caribbean free people of color. Moreover in Cuba, as in other Caribbean slaveholding colonies, it was officially forbidden to mention the Saint Domingue rebellion. Although private government communications reveal a frightened awareness of the events, newspapers make next to no mention of it: “From 1791 onward, Cuban authorities time and again issued ordinances regarding the discussion of the events of Saint Domingue, French subjects and Saint Domingue
slaves” (Fischer 2–5). This reflected the degree of fear of “another Haiti” that white Cubans and other Caribbean Creoles suffered. For this reason, Fischer insists that we must examine the silences within history and texts as vigorously as we search the archives for written evidence of anti-colonial, anti-slavery sentiment. Gaspar and Geggus have asserted that it is often difficult to determine if the Haitian slave revolt directly influenced other revolts across the Caribbean, although we know of a few cases in which it did. The Aponte Conspiracy of 1812 is one of them (14–15; Fischer 41–56; Gott 49–50).

In the wake of the meeting of the Spanish Cortes in Cádiz in 1812, some Cuban slaves and free people of color were convinced that slavery had been abolished (such rumors were common throughout the nineteenth century in Cuba). Through secret meetings in Havana and communications between smaller towns, a black revolt for independence was mobilized by José Antonio Aponte, a free Cuban artisan of color. Gott asserts that history has located initial impulses of the Cuban independence movement in Aponte’s rebellion, “yet he was more probably a black nationalist in the Haitian mould” (50). Fischer insists on this connection to Haiti, given the material culture that was collected from Aponte’s home and a book he had in his possession when Spanish authorities seized him and his fellow rebels. Pictures of the Haitian revolutionary heroes Henri Christophe, Toussaint L’Ouverture and Dessalines, along with copies of the Haitian declaration of independence (1804) and letters written by Christophe were among his belongings confiscated when he was captured (Gott 50; Fischer 42). Aponte’s book, which is examined in detail by Fischer, was a collage of drawings, maps, portraits, and other media, both visual and historical, in various languages. Fischer claims that because Aponte and his fellow conspirators were aware of the danger of mentioning Haiti in their interrogation by Cuban officials who were anxious to uncover precisely this correspondence, they were careful to distances themselves from mentioning it: “Admitting that he had at one point owned portraits of the Haitian generals, whom he refers to with the Hispanized names, Luvertú, Salinas, Juan Francisco, and Cristóbal, and describes as ‘French Blacks,’ Aponte claims that he burned them when he found out that they were illegal in Cuba” (49). Rather interesting for our purposes here is Fischer’s revelation of the explicit importance of Egypt and Abyssinia in Aponte’s book of historical images, appearing as background, along with the Nile river, to many representations of events. She suggests the possibility that Aponte was aware of Enlightenment Freemasonry in the Caribbean, in which some mulattoes had limited participation. She suspects,
however, that “the trope of African Egypt may have been subjected to radical transvaluations, which in turn reflect the suppression of revolutionary anti-slavery in the early nineteenth century” and points out that nineteenth-century Haitian writers promoted the idea that European civilization had originated in Egypt, that Egyptians were black, and that this reality undermined the existence of inequality between the races (52–53).

Manzano’s careful manipulation of the contested space of North Africa that held historical meaning for Spain allows for his creation of allegorical black subjectivity. In response to his mother’s unsuspecting inquiries as to his origins, the disguised Selim responds:

Tengo de Árabes noble descendencia
Y a mis padres conozco ¡desgraciados!
Cuántos desastres la fortuna adversa
(Aparte.)
Departó contra ellos . . . !(2. 3. 124)

Here, Manzano taps into the historical agency and cultural currency of North Africa to make reference to black reality—and the slave trade—in Cuba. There is, after all, no place for black subjectivity in Cuban literature except on the level of the symbolic and the subterraneous. It is the unmentionable, the unspeakable. For this reason, as several critics argue, the Cuban antislavery novel used reformist narrative to diffuse white anxiety about black agency, that is, fear of another Haiti (Fischer 111–14; Ramos “Cuerpo” 226; Vera-León 14–15). Conversely, Manzano and other authors of color are forbidden to explicitly make reference to Haiti or black rebellion and therefore must do so metaphorically or through an historical distancing.

Manzano’s Selim is, in my view, the dramatic representation of the ascent of an enlightened governance of color in Cuba. Key to Selim’s authority in the play is the mysterious but significant letter or document that he carries (referred to as “una carta” and later as “un pliego”): It appears three times in the drama and lends legitimacy to his return to his homeland to kill the usurping Barbarroja in order to restore just order. This document does not appear in the Spanish version, and its contents are never revealed to the public, but it conveys enormous political power. When Barbarroja confronts Zafira, demanding that she reveal Selim’s identity, she presents him with the accusing document:
Barbarroja’s response is fear and rage, a terror that runs parallel to that of both Spaniards and Cuban whites who were consistently confronted with black legal demands for freedom. For fear of persecution, Manzano is unable to explicitly reveal the contents of this letter, which I read as symbolizing the rights of man, that is, juridical grounds for freeing for black slaves and granting national autonomy for all Cubans. The clandestine conspiracy among the characters of Zafira (and between dramatic text and audience) echo the real circumstances of oppression under which the play was written, as well as the veiled messages it contains. Noemí assures Selim that he can trust him as he guides him to safety in the palace:

Selim: Y qué exiges de mí?
Noemí: Venid conmigo
Donde con libertad hablaros pueda. (2. 12. 140)

Perhaps it is no small coincidence that while Aponte was executed and his head displayed in a cage at the entrance to Havana in order to provoke terror in potential rebels, Noemí, the slave conspirator, slays Barbarroja and exhibits his head as proof of the usurper’s demise (Gott 51).

Friol has suggested that Manzano creates a dramatic historical version of himself in Noemí (82). I would argue, rather, that Manzano envisions himself in the role of the lettered Selim, one who has obtained legitimacy as a free citizen through law and writing. Zafira suggests a Cuba in which the Selims, literate individuals of color like Manzano, provide intellectual leadership in a sovereign government. But Selim, and perhaps Manzano as well, is complexly ambivalent about this role. Refusing to assume the throne and mimic the monarchy of an ancien régime that has lost relevancy in the nineteenth century, Selim feels that it is the people, (and for Manzano this includes the massive black population in Cuba), who should determine the nation. Says Selim:

Así no es ya mi causa la del pueblo,
Porque el pueblo es el alma de la patria
Y él la supo adornar con sus trofeos:
Mía es toda la acción que libra queda
Mío el honor que en el palenque anhelo. (5. 3. 183)

The image of the palenque, or runaway slave community, could be read as a very personal metaphor for Manzano, who sought above all the peace and freedom to write. This space, which the author is careful to qualify as one of honor, evokes not only a voluntary separation from an oppressive and fatiguing society, but also a symbolic space of authentic black subjectivity in the Americas, perhaps from which a source of Cuban national identity might flow.

In 1844, two years after he published his Zafira, Manzano was implicated in the Escalera or Ladder Conspiracy and was incarcerated, tortured, and interrogated along with Plácido (fellow mulatto poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés) and other Cubans of color. After trial, Manzano was exonerated and released, only to be arrested and imprisoned again a few days later, this time for almost a year and a half, after which time he was definitively released (Friol 211). Manzano escaped with his life, but Plácido and many others were executed. As with the Aponte conspiracy, interrogators attempted to identify influences of the Haitian revolution in the Escalera conspiracy. “While no evidence has emerged to the effect that Haiti in fact supported or promised to support the uprising, the trial records do show that several witnesses claimed that the idea was to follow the example of Haiti and that the conspirators had hoped that once the uprising was in motion, Haiti would step in” (Fischer 82–83). Spanish authorities were also suspicious of collusion with British abolitionists and were intent to discover which, if any, author of color had fulfilled a supposed commission by Del Monte in 1842 to write a poetic composition lauding British abomination of slavery. While under interrogation, Manzano stated that he had not written such a text, yet he revealed in his testimony his belief that slavery was wrong. He did so carefully by placing those words in the mouth of the English consulate: “Que este individuo le manifestó que el Consul inglés Mr. Tumbr, en nombre de su gobierno, proyectaba la libertad de la esclavitud, y al dar a

14. For document transcriptions from the interrogations, see Friol (188–212). The so-called Ladder Conspiracy gained its name from the means by which slaves and conspirators suspected of sedition were tortured: by tying them to ladders to be beaten. Domingo del Monte was also implicated.
toda persona de color los derechos que la naturaleza les concede, que para el efecto el contribuyese con su talento poético” (Quoted in Friol 196). Manzano’s collaboration with Madden in the 1840 London publication was a sufficient approximation to the type of text the authorities were looking to uncover, though it was never mentioned. Ultimately, however, Manzano did not have to turn to a celebration of the British to condemn Spanish slavery and colonialism. Rather, he undertook a careful manipulation of Hispanism, simultaneously writing himself into and subverting the Hispanic literary tradition by recasting a Spanish text and infusing it with echoes of revolutionary antislavery philosophy.

Manzano’s *Zafira* anticipates a rupture with Spain and the establishment of universal freedom that will inevitably entail bloodshed. Says *Zafira*:

Mi mente, ya exaltada y confundida,
Ve en la sangrienta lucha como triunfa
El sublime poder de la justicia . . . (3. 2. 144–45)

Moreover, with Noemí, Manzano introduces into the center stage of Hispanic literary tradition his creation of a Cuban national hero: a black slave who is permitted a bold act of bloody, violent retribution against an illegal imposition of power. No Creole Cuban antislavery text ever would have dared to create such a character so reminiscent of black Haitian rebels and Cuban insurrectionary slaves. Neither would most dramas of the day have permitted such a space: Friol tells us that whenever a black character appeared on the stage in Havana, the public (largely white, of course) would whistle in protest (68–69). It is difficult to even imagine, then, an appearance by this rebellious slave character in Havana in the 1840s. Noemí stands as the definitive evidence of *Zafira* having been written by an Afro-Cuban who promoted black sovereignty both personal and political.

While Manzano refused to see black Cubans “whitened” away, he certainly did not envision the expulsion of whites from Cuba, nor was he likely proposing a government exclusively of color in the Haitian model. He counted many Creole Cubans among his friends. Instead he used *Zafira* as a vehicle to valorize (North) Africanness, and thus blackness, as a source of culture.

15. See Ada Ferrer’s *Insurgent Cuba* for a discussion of race in the Cuban wars of independence. The Ten Years War (1868–1878) was followed by The Small War (1879–1880) and The War of Independence (1895–1898).
and civilization, as many Haitian revolutionaries had also done. And he put into his agressed characters’ hands the legal documentation required to promote the ideals of black liberty and self-determination within an independent Cuba. This powerful document, carefully hushed in Manzano’s play, should be read as a representation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, a text wielded by many black Caribbeans in the nineteenth century who sought equality under the law (Nesbitt 28–30).

Not coincidentally, history largely bore out Manzano’s dramatic national imagining that a Cuban nation should exist, and that it should arise from the efforts of Afro-Cuban hands and minds: in 1868, with the Grito De Yara, the Ten Years War began. And while agitation for increased autonomy had been occurring in Cuba for well over a half century, the three wars of independence that put an end to slavery and Spanish colonialism on the island were waged primarily not by Cuban criollos, but rather by Cubans of color, that is, Afro-Cubans.

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