Title
How Cuba Changed My Life

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STILL REMEMBER receiving the acceptance email for the paper I was to present in Cuba at a week-long conference that proposed to celebrate the bicentenary anniversary of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s birth, one of the pillars of Cuban literature. I will never forget the happiness I felt when I was notified; not only was I going to Havana for a week but I was also going to present a paper on one of the best novels I had ever read.

The novel, titled Sab, is the story of a slave in 1840s Cuba. Despite having been abolished in a number of Latin American countries, Cuba still practiced slavery in the mid-1800s. Slavery played a crucial role in the production of sugar, cotton and tobacco, three of the island’s most lucrative products. However, the detail that caught my attention from the first pages of the novel was that Sab (the main character) is not presented as a typical slave: he does not work in the plantations, he can read and write—and even knows some Shakespeare, he is very close to his masters, and, as the narrator explains, he is oftentimes mistaken for a white man. Slavery, and the description of its terrible practices, is present throughout the novel, but it occupies a marginal space. The readers are aware that Sab is a slave, but not because of the life he leads; rather, they know because Sab himself tells them and speaks openly about it.

I found it challenging to agree with critics who proposed that Sab is clearly an abolitionist novel. Slavery is present, and criticized throughout the work; however, the narrator never proposes its full abolition, nor does (s)he argue that slaves should gain the freedom and rights that other members of society possess. Instead, what is blatantly present is the criticism towards the misogynistic aspects of the Cuban patriarchal society, where all women were seen as simple possessions that could be bought and sold by their male counterparts. As Sab himself explains, “slaves can at least change their master, they can hope that by accumulating gold they will be able to buy their freedom, one day. Women, instead, as they lift their frail hands and their outraged forehead to ask for freedom, hear the monster with its sepulchral voice yelling: “To the grave””1 (translation mine).

Although it is still too early to speak of feminism at the time this novel was written, in my essay I argue that the main aim of Avellaneda’s work is to defend women and denounce their position in society. Throughout my paper I pose five questions, and suggest five possible answers, to demonstrate that the novel is not, in fact, abolitionist, but rather pre-feminist, while also presenting some anti-slavery characteristics. Despite some opposing voices in the audience, I noticed that many of the people who were attending the conference agreed with me, and supported my feminist reading of the novel.

My week-long stay in Cuba did not only allow me to present a paper in front of a crowd of renowned scholars, to make important connections for my future academic career, and to receive feedback on my work; I was also exposed to a completely different reality than what I had been used to up to that moment. Aside from never having been to a Latin American country, I had also never traveled to a country where communism was the main political ideology. Although I believed I was prepared for what I would see in Cuba, once I reached the island I

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realized that the reality was completely different than anything I had read in books, or heard on the news. This concerned both the positive aspects and the negative ones.

Let’s start with my experience at the Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí. After arriving on time, and waiting in line for passport control for about thirty minutes, it was finally my turn. I was a little nervous because I did not personally hold my Cuban visa in my American passport; rather, it was waiting for me in the Havana airport. All I had to do, according to the travel agency, was call the travel agent upon arrival and wait for him to bring me the visa. Simple enough, I thought. I ended up waiting for three hours because no one seemed to be able to locate such person, and no one else in the entire airport was able to help me. Growing up in Italy taught me a great deal about patience, and given that I was prepared for some sort of delay, this small incident did not affect my mood. On the contrary, I was able to notice details that I simply would have missed, had I gone through passport control without any problems. What caught my attention was music playing and that a music television station was turned on. I couldn’t help but smile seeing how everyone who worked in that airport appeared to be so full of life, despite the serious and formal location.

As I walked out of the airport doors. I decided to ask someone why there was such a numerous crowd, and the man kindly answered that all those families were either bringing a family member to the airport or picking someone up. As I thought about the international airports in the United States—jammed with cars stopped near the curbs of each terminal to drop people off, quickly hug them and kiss them goodbye, and drive off just as hurriedly—I realized what a different reality it was. Dropping someone off, or picking someone up, in Cuba, was a family affair: everyone wanted to be a part of it, by either saying goodbye to someone, or greeting them upon their return. Parents, siblings, children, grandparents, friends: everyone wanted to witness such an important event.

The two elements that literally penetrated my soul, during and after my trip, were the music and the people. I perceived Cuban music as a constant soundtrack. With its melody, rhythm, and melancholy, I felt that it accompanied everyone’s life on the island. I suppose this happens because music has the power of uniting people from different backgrounds and different life situations, and of bringing everyone to the same level. Some of the songs I heard were tremendously nostalgic, yet they were truly beautiful. They gave me the shivers by just listening to them once, and as much as I can try, it is very complicated to put into words what I felt through their melody.

Aside from hearing music in the streets, at cafes, in restaurants, and even in the hotel lobby, I was lucky enough to be invited to a concert, sponsored by the conference organizers, where traditional Cuban songs were played. The enthralling aspect of the concert was that these songs were not simply famous Cuban melodies; given that the aim of the conference was to celebrate an important woman writer, the repertoire was composed of songs that were either written and sung by women, or dedicated to them. I will forever remember that as one of the singers started warbling the lyrics to “Yolanda”, perhaps one of the most famous and beautiful Cuban melodies, the whole crowd chimed in as well, transforming that moment into a heartfelt experience.

The Cuban people I met were the most heartwarming aspect of the trip. I am not only speaking about the conference participants, who belonged to numerous Cuban cultural organizations and associations, but also the people I met on the street, in restaurants, and in hotels. What struck me most was their incredible generosity, a generosity that I had never personally experienced. It reminded me of the stories my Italian grandmother used to tell me of the situation during, and right after World War Two, when most people were poverty-stricken, yet they were able to show their generosity towards those who needed it most. The reality that I saw in Cuba deeply reminded me of my grandmother’s stories. Despite having close to nothing, many of the people I met were able to give me more than I
Catedral de la Virgen María de la Concepción
Inmaculada de La Habana
could have ever imagined, from a kind word, to an interesting piece of information regarding Havana, to a book on the history of the city. It was amazing for me to see how, despite living in a difficult political, social, and economic situation, the spirit of these people could not be broken. There was a kindness in their words, something that I had never really experienced neither in Italy nor in the United States. And, quite honestly, it was refreshing to establish relationships with people face to face, by speaking to them, and not through the ever-so-present technology on which we are all so dependent.

All in all, Cuba changed my life. As I was trying to explain my experience to my family I could find no other word but “soul-filling,” since that’s exactly how I felt as I was leaving the island. Despite my short stay, the days I spent there showed me a new reality and a new way of looking at life. As I was boarding the plane to Miami I decided that Cuba, with its positive and negative traits, would stay with me forever. In that moment I consciously took action to incorporate some aspects of Cuban literature in my doctoral dissertation, to help shed some light on the reality of a country that is oftentimes judged and misunderstood because of a lack of correct information. It was a cathartic experience that continued after I returned to the United States, as I felt that I had learned so much from the Cuban people, and from the country itself.

Given the recent events that are taking place between Cuba and the United States, I believe it to be even more crucial to not simply dismiss the importance and the beauty of this Caribbean country because of what people might think of it, or might have heard on the news, or might remember from old history lessons. The conference I attended, and my experience as a tourist in Havana, proved to me how important it is to study and know a country’s past, to better understand and appreciate its present.

Jennifer Monti is a first-year doctoral student in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA. Her interests include Catalan female literature of the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries, transatlantic studies with an emphasis on Cuba, and the representation of women through photography and pornography. She received a travel grant from CSW to present her conference paper, titled “Sab, la mujer y la esclavitud: cinco preguntas (y respuestas) para refutar el género abolicionista,” at the XXIV Congreso Anual de la Asociación Internacional de Literatura y Cultura Femenina Hispánica (AILCFH), which was held in Havana, Cuba.