

The Haunting Letter: Presence, Absence and Writing in

Sab

Emmy Herland

University of Washington, USA

Abstract

Written expression allows for communication across absences both spatial and temporal. In fact, Jacques Derrida argues in his essay "Signature Event Context" (1988) that absence is an element of every communication and, because of this absence, meaning shifts with new contexts and displacements. When the titular character of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's 1841 Cuban-Spanish Gothic novel *Sab* – a black slave in love with his white mistress – dies immediately after finishing a letter, he imbues the writing with his presence by way of his first-person expression and personal narrative, while simultaneously ensuring his irreversible absence from his text by death. That his letter outlives him allows for the reiteration of Sab's final words and thoughts each time his letter is reread. This play between absence and presence inherent in Sab's letter is the same essential paradox of the specter as described by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993). Sab's combined presence and absence in his letter turns him into a kind of ghost that haunts those who read his words.

In this paper, I analyze Sab's letter and its rippling effect throughout the story. The letter acts to identify Sab — and through him the institution of slavery that he both represents and protests against — as the haunting figure of the novel. This haunting, by its very existence, critiques the remembrance of history.

Keywords: Ghost, Haunting, Gothic, Cuban Gothic, Caribbean, Letter, Epistolary, Derrida, *Sab*

The Haunting Letter: Presence, Absence and Writing in *Sab*

Ghosts exist in the contemporary cultural imaginary with a very particular and widely accepted physicality. The images are so familiar as to be clichéd: a silhouette shrouded in white, or a semi-transparent figure. Yet, to understand the ghost in this form is limiting, as it constrains the ghost to a mostly-human body. A specter, however, need not be understood as having a human form in order to perform its haunting. To haunt, a ghost only needs to *have existed* in the past, and to return and *exist again* in the present in some perceivable way. Often that return is represented by the figure of the deceased, though as something less than entirely visible in order to signal their absence, which exists simultaneous to their presence. This paradox, which is inherent to the specter, is part of what Jacques Derrida (1993) refers to as *hauntology* (p. 10). A portmanteau of “haunt” and “ontology,” the term describes the way in which the ghost exists in an interstitial space between two extremes, as something both past and present, both present and absent. A ghost is, in fact, an absence made present, and in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s Gothic novel *Sab*, the absence of the novel’s eponymous protagonist is made present by a letter written in the final hours of his life.

Sab is layered in hybridity. The novel was written and published in Madrid in 1841 by its Cuban-born author who spent half her life in Spain. Its setting is Cuba, though it would not be published there until 1914. The novel, like Avellaneda herself, is “neither Old World nor New World” (Sommer, 1993, p. 114). Doris Sommer, in her chapter “Sab c’est moi,” explores various similarities between the author and her titular character: the mixed-race, slave/overseer Sab. Avellaneda is Sab, Sommer argues, because of her hybridity and her status as an outsider, both characteristics which Sab shares. What’s more, she argues, their status as writers unites them, noting: “the obscure slave represents the privileged novelist because both vent their passions by writing and because their literary slippages destabilize the rhetorical system that constrains them” (Sommer, 1993, p. 115). Avellaneda writes *Sab*, Sab writes his letter.

The Gothic elements of the novel allow for the supernatural and the sublime that emerge from Sab’s letter. Sab is a mulatto slave (though his actual position is that of an overseer) in love with his master’s daughter, Carlota. Throughout the novel, whose action takes place on the declining Bellavista estate – Gómez de Avellaneda’s tropical version of the Gothic castle – Sab battles the passion he feels for the white mistress who is perpetually out of reach. Both the transgression of the mixed-race protagonist’s love and the excess of his emotions indicate the novel’s use of the Gothic mode, which, according to Fred Botting (1996), prizes these concepts, as well as opening a space for the sublime. Sab’s

frenzied passions and bold declarations of his own freedom and humanity are crushed by the limiting societal expectations which disallow his love for Carlota. The pain of his impossible love is what kills Sab, his heart bursting in his chest at the same moment that Carlota marries the wealthy, white Enrique Otway. His death employs the “hyperbolic unreality, even surreality” (Hogle, 2002, p. 14) that characterizes the Gothic. At the same time, the tragedy of his love and the distress expressed in his final communication provoke the sort of terrible passions that characterize the sublime. As Burke notes such passions “are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances” (Burke, 1757, p. 32).

Before Sab’s death at the end of the tale, he writes a letter to his only confidant, his mistress’s cousin Teresa, in which he is finally able to express himself freely. The letter itself is a diatribe against slavery in which he advocates for his own virtue and declares (though not for the first time) his love for his mistress, Carlota. The physical body of Sab’s letter, that is, the paper, outlives its origin and allows for the reiteration of Sab’s final words and thoughts as if they are new when Carlota, five years after Sab’s death, reads them for the first time. Sab’s letter, like Avellaneda’s novel, is able to reach across an absence of place (Sab’s death and Avellaneda’s emigration) and time (Sab’s letter reaches Carlota five years after it is written, and Avellaneda’s novel reaches Cuba 73 years after it is published in Madrid).

The issue of communication across absence is a central topic for Jacques Derrida in his essay “Signature Event Context” (1988). Writing is recognized as a mode of communication that easily allows for absence—by physical distance or death—of either the sender or the receiver while still containing meaning (though the issue of *how* this meaning is defined and understood must be examined). In fact, Derrida argues that absence is an element of every communication, since in any form a sign is separate from its referent (1988, p. 6-7). He also argues that signs themselves don’t hold fixed meaning, or even multiple meanings, but rather have no meaning and are only given meaning by their context; as long as the sign remains and can be read, a meaning can be imposed by its reader (Derrida, 1988, p. 9). Sab’s letter is iterable—repeatable, as it can be read again and again—and is imbued with meaning by its recipients’ knowledge of the man himself, though that meaning shifts with new contexts and with displacements, both of reader and of time.

The play between absence and presence that is inherent in writing, and in meaning, is the same essential paradox that characterizes the specter. Sab’s letter, by combining his present thoughts—including a great deal of personal perspective and history marked by

first person pronouns, rendering the document essentially *his*—and his absence by death, turns him into a kind of ghost that haunts the women who read his words. If we consider, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock does, that the specter is a “symptom of repressed knowledge” (2013, p. 64) whose haunting “indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events” (p. 63), then we must recognize that Sab’s epistolary haunting of the novel destabilizes official history and reminds readers of the things that are left out: the stories of slaves and of women.

Sab’s letter originates in a scene of death. Sab writes the letter in his adoptive mother’s house while sitting vigil for his adoptive brother who is dying. Sab is sick as he writes his letter, with “ojos... hundidos [que] brillan con el fuego de la fiebre” [sunken eyes that shine with the heat of his fever] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 243). As he writes, his condition worsens but he doesn’t rest. We are told: “Pero Sab escribía y aquella carta fue todo lo que quedó de él” [But Sab wrote, and that letter was all that was left of him] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 244). Not only is the letter what is left of Sab after he dies, but writing it is also his last living task. It is all that is left of him, but also all that is left *for* him.

Not only does Sab write through his final hours, but it seems that he spends what remains of his ability to communicate on the pages of his letter. After finishing it, he finds that his voice is broken and dead; when he tries to speak he feels “espantado del sonido de su propia voz, que le parecía un eco del sepulcro” [scared of the sound of his own voice, which appeared to him to be an echo from the grave] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 245). First his voice turns into a communication from beyond the grave, and then he begins to lose the ability to think at all: “confundiéronse sus ideas, entorpecióse su imaginación, turbóse su memoria” [his ideas were confused, his imagination was sluggish, his memory was disturbed] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 246). At this point, Sab’s body breaks and he collapses. Although he is not yet dead, he is lost. The fact that Sab loses all forms of communication or language just as he completes his letter is incredibly suggestive. Sab’s death is almost supernatural, both in its uncanny timing since, as noted by Stephen Hart, Sab dies at the exact moment that Carlota is married to Enrique Otway (1999, p. 72), and in its cause. While the townspeople suppose that Sab’s death was due to a fall, given the bruise on his chest, this bruise is caused by the bursting of all of his veins. His cause of death reflects his uncontrollable emotions and his frenzied sense of passion; Sab’s heart explodes inside him as he drains his life out through his pen into the letter that he leaves behind. His end betrays a Gothic sensibility, “untamed by reason and unrestrained by conventional eighteenth-century demands for simplicity,

realism and probability" (Botting, 1996, p. 2). Its unnaturalness also sets the stage for Sab's particular type of undeath by suggesting that his death is somehow unreal or incomplete, allowing, on some level, his spirit to inhabit the words he writes.

Derrida and Absence

As he analyzes the characteristics inherent to writing (and, he will argue, to communication of all types), Derrida (1988) highlights the notion of absence. We write in order to communicate to someone who is absent; writing can greatly expand the potential physical scope of communication, with speech and action being limited to those who can hear or see us. This physical distance is described by Derrida as merely a modified presence; the "radical absence," or complete "rupture in presence", is death (1988, p. 8). In fact, for writing to even be considered writing, it must be able to outlive its creator: "To write is to produce a mark that will constitute as a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten" (1988, p. 8). The creator, in our case Sab, abandons the mark he writes, and beyond him the writing continues not only to exist but to change and *produce*. The writing is, in some way, a *reproduction* of its origin or an external embodiment of a piece of him. The writing continues to act beyond the death of its origin, much like a ghost who comes back from the dead.

Before we assume that Sab's letter, which he seems to imbue with the last remnants of his living self by transcribing it in the final hours of his life, functions as an independent representation that merely repeats the meaning intended by its origin, we must take into account Derrida's (1988) notion of context. Context provides the definition of each sign or mark, since they do not have literal or inherent meaning. Because writing expands the scope of communication, "a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription" (Derrida, 1988, p. 9). Sab's letter, once written, can never again exist in the same context out of which it was born. The scene will never be recreated and Sab will die. Yet his letter will continue to exist, to be read and to be reinterpreted beyond his lifetime. Because writing is infinitely iterable and can be read beyond the context in which it was created, it will constantly and necessarily change contexts and therefore meaning.

Sab's letter is iterated in three main contexts within the narrative. The first is the context in which it is written, as has already been discussed. The second is as the letter is delivered to its intended recipient concurrently with the news of Sab's death. As such, the letter and Sab never simultaneously exist for Teresa, the addressee. The context has

already drastically shifted before the letter has been read by anyone. The next major iteration of the letter comes when Teresa passes it on to Carlota five years later. Now it is Teresa who is dying, and who spends her last living moments urging Carlota to read and appreciate the text—the ghost—that Sab left behind. Teresa dies just before Carlota begins to read the letter, meaning that her death is part of this new context. Death, the absolute rupture of presence, is the most fundamental transformer of context for Sab's letter as it passes from hand to hand.

Derrida argues that death, as absolute absence, is a fundamental characteristic of writing which, in fact, allows writing to exist. The text must be able to live on beyond the death of the author. For this precise reason, Jodey Castricano argues that writing and haunting are “not only interrelated; they are inseparable” (2001, p. 29). Castricano, who analyzes gothic patterns and motifs in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), tells us: “To write, thus, is to *anticipate the memory of one's other, one's departed*” (2001, p. 41).

I am particularly interested in her invocation of anticipation, since to write is to recognize both an absence that may exist in the present, that is, at the time of writing, but also indicates the knowledge that an absence *will occur* in the future. In fact, since death is inevitable, so is our absolute absence from whatever texts we may have written. Thus, in anticipating the absolute absence of our other, we may also anticipate the absence of ourselves. She goes on to explain that when a text is “signed by the other”, or when a text is used by “another,” that text *comes back* to haunt (2001, p. 16). Castricano is speaking specifically of translation, though a consideration of reader-response theories – which believe that the meaning of a text is created by the reader and not necessarily inherent in the text itself – would extend this effect to each reader as well. Louise Rosenblatt states that the “relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-for spiral in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed” (1938, p. 26) and, similarly, Wolfgang Iser writes, “the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence” (1972, p. 275). There are many variations of reader-response criticism, but at the core of the words of both Rosenblatt and Iser is the idea that as diverse individuals read a text, they create a *new version* of that text. Unlike the translations that Castricano references, these versions are not necessarily tangible and written, but are nevertheless new iterations of that text in a new context. With each new version the text *comes back* in a slightly new form. This return is therefore the *revenant*, the ghost of the disembodied, de/recontextualized author.

Although many pieces of the “collectivity of presences” that constitute context shifts as Sab's letter is iterated and reiterated, Teresa and Carlota are also influenced by their knowledge of Sab and his life. Each woman has different perceptions of the man, just as

Sab's perception of himself is unique, but the long and profound relationships of the two women with Sab are a fundamental piece of context connected to each repetition of the letter. Having witnessed Sab's life, albeit external to his own understanding and consciousness, the women are able to furbish this letter which describes deeply personal thoughts and events, with greater meaning than someone unacquainted with the source. For readers outside the story, that is, readers of the novel who only come to Sab's letter towards the end of the text, significance is provided by the rest of the novel's narrative – in glimpses of the thoughts and actions not only of the letter's source but also its recipients. Furthermore, we might also say that literary study and analysis seeks to provide context for the novel that in turn contextualizes the letter.

The Signature of the Ghost

While examining the contexts of Sab's letter, it is also productive to look at another element of Derrida's (1988) examination of writing; the signature. In the scene in which Sab writes his letter, there is no mention of him signing his name; instead, we only know that he finishes writing just as the sun rises. At the end of the letter itself, there is no mark for Sab's name. For the reader of the narrative, the letter is marked with Sab's name in an introductory title: "Carta de Sab a Teresa" [Letter from Sab to Teresa] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 263) (it is unclear whether this title constitutes a part of the letter itself or if we are to assume that it was provided only by Avellaneda for the reader of the novel) and the novel itself is named for Sab, essentially signing the entire text. While there can be no doubt for Teresa or Carlota that the letter comes from Sab, since they have been provided with a spoken signature—an explanation from a messenger that the letter was written by Sab—and because the first-person language and experiences could only belong to him, within the text there is no actual mark. The act of signing the end of a letter is so common that Doris Sommer takes for granted that Sab signs his letter, stating: "Sab's name at the end of the letter serves as the signature for the entire novel..." (1993, p.115). Perhaps, due to common practice, it would be reasonable to assume that Sab does sign his letter, and yet the fact remains that we have no written evidence of this.

Derrida explains that the written signature "implies the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer. But, it will be claimed, the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in the past *now* or present which will remain a future *now* or present, thus in a general present, in the transcendental form of presence" (1988, p. 20). If the signature is the empirical evidence of the absence of the signer, then what are we to make of the fact that Sab doesn't seem to sign his letter? His absence, or his past-presence, is not empirically or eternally marked. Instead, Sab remains tethered to his text only as long as

his name survives in verbal communication. He remains tethered to his text as his messenger tells Teresa, and Carlota and Otway who happen to be standing by, that the letter was written by “el pobre difunto” [the poor deceased man] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 248). Notably Teresa does not repeat the signature when she passes the letter on to Carlota, attributing it instead only to “la memoria de los muertos” [the memory of the dead] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 263). If the letter survives beyond Carlota’s life, it risks being separated entirely from its source; the evidence of Sab as having-been present will be lost. Instead, what will survive as long as the letter itself does, is the name of its recipient. Teresa’s name is invoked not only in the heading, but also repeatedly throughout the body of the letter itself, more often even than Carlota’s. Teresa becomes a part of the letter.

Parallel to Derrida’s (1988) description of the signature as being *empirical evidence* of nonpresence, we find sociologist Avery Gordon’s description of the ghost as “just the sign, or the empirical evidence, if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place” (2008, p. 8). Although Sab doesn’t have a signature, his having-been present is understood by both of his recipients and it is this inferred signature that marks his letter as the ghost. The ghost is characterized by a series of paradoxes, since it exists in a space between life and death, between presence and absence. It is also a figure of the past returned in the present, thereby rupturing our linear concept of time. Sab’s letter is all of these things. Teresa, as she passes the letter on to Carlota, tells her cousin: “Entonces tendrás ese papel: ese papel es toda un alma: es una vida, una muerte: todas las ilusiones resumidas, todos los dolores compendiados...y cuando el ruido de los vivos fatigue tu alma, refúgiate en la memoria de los muertos” [And so you will have this paper: this paper is all soul: it is a life, a death: all the abbreviated hopes, all the abridged pains...and when the noise of the living tires your soul, seek refuge in the memory of the dead] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 263). She attributes both life and death to the letter, engendering the paradox of the specter, and also reminds her cousin that this letter is the memory of the dead. Memory is what lies behind the ghost; it is the haunting that the ghost represents.

Teresa, as the primary recipient of the letter, is the first to be haunted by its contents. After reading it, she absconds to a convent, leaving behind only a letter as explanation and farewell, and it is in the convent that she spends the rest of her life. Otway supposes, when he discovers Teresa’s absence, that she has left because of Sab’s death, since he believes that Teresa is in love with Sab. The reader, however, knows that Teresa loves Otway and so we could also assume that Teresa has left for the convent as a result of Otway’s marriage that morning to her cousin. Although we have no explicit explanation from Teresa, she does say, five years later as she passes the letter on to Carlota: “A ese

papel debo esta dulce creencia que me ha preservado del más cruel de los males: el desaliento" [I owe to this paper the sweet faith that has protected me from the cruelest of evils: despair] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 262). Whatever her reasons for leaving, throughout the years that she has been gone the letter has been sustaining her. The despondency that Teresa has felt since receiving the letter, including, we may assume, her despair at Otway's marriage, has been negated by the text. We can therefore understand that Teresa's haunting by the letter has been benevolent; she has been preserved and uplifted by Sab's words.

Teresa is able to feel encouraged by the letter, though not because it is a particularly heartening text. Rather, Sab rages against his condition as a slave and laments the injustice that he has witnessed: "He visto siempre que el fuerte oprimía al débil, que el sabio engañaba al ignorante, y que el rico despreciaba al pobre. No he podido encontrar entre los hombres la gran armonía que Dios ha establecido en la naturaleza" [I have always seen that the strong oppressed the weak, that the wise deceived the ignorant, and that the rich disregarded the poor. I have not found among men the great harmony that God has established in nature] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 266). Through his lament, Sab demonstrates his own humanity and progressiveness. These are the characteristics that Teresa finds so moving and which she tells her cousin will move her as well. The letter, she explains, will alter the way that Carlota views her life and her reality; the letter will haunt her too.

Transferred Haunting

In addition to Sab's haunting through the letter, Teresa, through her five-year possession of it, has left an imprint in the pages. As she instructs Carlota to remove the letter from its hiding place, she refers to it as "un papel mojado por mis lágrimas" [a paper soaked in my tears] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 262). The letter has taken in Teresa's bodily fluid—her tears—and now contains a piece of her. What is more, this bodily incorporation has affected the materiality of the letter itself, tattering its page. As she goes on to extol the letter and describe the ways in which it has moved her, she further appropriates its sentiments. Just as Sab drained his life into the letter, Teresa drains her life into its praise; she dies just after finishing her entreaty that Carlota read it. By associating herself so closely with the views expressed in the letter, Teresa attempts to make it her representation as well as Sab's so that she may haunt alongside him.

As the letter passes from one hand to another, it creates a link between its possessors. First Sab is connected to Teresa, then Sab and Teresa to Carlota, since the letter serves

as an object of exchange between them. Catherine Davies (2003) analyzes the complex web of exchanged gifts between the characters of the novel in her article "The Gift in *Sab*." She explains that Sab attempts to gift his love and devotion to Carlota but the reciprocity that he dreams of is absent and he is rejected. Teresa, meanwhile, offers "her self, her time and her love" (Davies, 2003, p. 51) to Sab when she offers herself as a possible substitute for her cousin. However, Sab dismisses her, choosing instead to make a financial gift (a winning lottery ticket) to Carlota, catalyzing her marriage to the man that she loves.

Because Teresa and Sab are so often positioned as doubles or as mirror images of one another, Sab's rejection of Teresa can be read as a rejection of himself. Stacey Schlauf speaks of a "communion of spirit" between the two, since "their bodies mirror and recognize each other as being in the same situation" (1986, p. 500). Each recognizes their own status as an outsider and sees it echoed in the other. The most powerful moment of communion between Sab and Teresa comes in a nighttime scene, when the two isolate themselves from their families and speak in their first long conversation together. After recognizing their sameness and their profound understanding, we see Sab first admit out loud his love for Carlota. This is the moment in which the bond is formed, but also in which Sab attempts to reject that bond by rejecting Teresa's offer of marriage. At this point in the text, Sab is still attempting to reject the label of outsider and join a class and a family that is inaccessible to him despite the fact that it is insinuated that he is in reality a relative of theirs. The rejection of self that is represented by the rebuff of Teresa is, then, a denunciation of the status of "otherness" that he wishes to dispel himself of.

Although Davies (2003) leaves the exchange of the letter from Sab's hands to Teresa's out of her analysis, choosing instead to focus on its exchange from Teresa's hands to Carlota's, the initial transfer of the letter indicates Sab's acknowledgement of his position and Teresa's, as well as their lack of mobility within the systems that oppress them. Sab's letter begins to undo the self-rejection and rejection of Teresa that he had previously shown as he recognizes her as the only appropriate recipient of his letter, despite his "ideal reader" being her cousin, Carlota (Sommer, 1993, p. 116). In his letter, he begins to embrace his own soul and question the structure of oppression that tells him that he is less human than the privileged *criollo* classes. The act of writing the letter reverses Sab's path of self-rejection in the direction of self-advocation, while addressing it to Teresa embraces the sameness that he feels with her, united by their difference.

While the initial gift of the letter from Sab to Teresa is reciprocation for the offer of friendship and marriage, according to Davies (2003) the re-gift of the letter from Teresa

to Carlota is reciprocation for the familial debt that Teresa owes. Carlota's family took Teresa in when she was orphaned, which is why Teresa dismissed the possibility of taking Sab's winning lottery ticket and marrying Otway in her cousin's place. It is also, Davies argues, the motivation that leads Teresa to pass the letter along with the promise that it will change Carlota's life for the better. The profound shift in Carlota's point of view, which, according to Sommer, takes Carlota from naïveté to understanding while also reviving "her faith in love (and liberation)" (1993, p. 116), is all that Teresa can do to repay the kindness given by Carlota's family. This final passing along of the letter demonstrates that "a virtual family or social relation is re-established between Sab, Teresa and Carlota" (Davies, 2003, p. 51). Because this link solidifies when Carlota reads the letter, it comes *after* Sab and Teresa have both died. Carlota is linked to two deceased souls, thereby ensuring a haunting by both.

Derrida, in *Specters of Marx* (1993), tells us that behind every haunting is a debt. As common lore indicates, ghosts return when they have unfinished business or when they have not been sufficiently mourned. The unfinished business left behind by Sab and Teresa lies in their love for Carlota, whether it be Sab's romantic devotion or Teresa's sisterly faithfulness. What Carlota never comes to fully understand is the more literal debt she owes each of her ghosts. When Sab discovers that he is in possession of a winning lottery ticket, he offers it first to Teresa, so that she might marry Otway. Teresa declines, urging Sab to keep the money for himself and leave slavery, Cuba and Carlota behind. Neither of them take the money, and instead it winds up in Carlota's hands. The course of her life has been determined by the love of her friends and their resulting financial gift.

The ghost story, however, is not merely about a single debt. Instead, ghosts stand as representations—or, as Gordon (2008) says, the empirical evidence—of a larger cultural and historical debt. Ghosts are figures whose existence is very much rooted in the concept of time, principally because of the ways in which they subvert linear temporality: "Ghosts evoke and perform this non-contemporaneity; they persist as an untimely time that destabilizes the order of things" (Keller, 2016, p. 5). As figures from the past who re-emerge in the present, ghosts demonstrate that "the present is always indebted to other temporalities—ones that both anticipate it and survive it" (Keller, 2016, p. 7). Ghosts remind us that there was once a different present, that what we see as absolute absence is more accurately described as a having-been present, that what is now present someday will have-been present and that what we think of as "now" is actually a combination of *all* times, of various presents and presences.

Slavery and Haunting

This blurring of past-present-future happens on a large historical and cultural scale wherein ghosts with uncollected debt remind us that we live our lives the way we do in the present only because of the past. Similarly, in Sab's Cuba, society was able to exist as it did because of the often-invisible work of slaves, who were a primary source of labor for sugar producers in the first half of the nineteenth century (Martinez-Aliner, 1989, p. 34). Just as Sab's invisible gift to Carlota allows for her much-desired marriage, the work of the family's slaves allows for Carlota's social position, both through the capital that their labor generates and by functioning as a status symbol or demonstration of wealth. Conversely, their departure or the loss of slaves serves as evidence of the Bellavista estate's decline; in Sab's opening conversation with Otway, he explains that the estate used to have "más de cien negros," [more than one hundred blacks] but now, "no tiene en él sino cincuenta negros" [it doesn't have more than fifty blacks] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 106). Slaves are thereby commodified and dehumanized, and thus erased. Sab's position as a slave primes him for haunting, since his dedication to, and work for, the Bellavista family will go unrecognized by history.

Sab's status as an abolitionist novel—and the first abolitionist novel of the Americas—is well established. It is clear, especially in Sab's letter, that the novel advocates for the equal quality of the souls of slaves and free men, questioning the construction of the racist institution:

Pero si no es Dios, Teresa, si son los hombres los que han formado este destino, si ellos han cortado las alas que Dios concedió a mi alma, si ellos han levantado un muro de errores y preocupaciones entre mí y el destino que la providencia me hacía señalado, si ellos han hecho inútiles los dones de Dios. [But it isn't God, Teresa, it is men who have caused this destiny, they have clipped the wings that God gave my soul, they have raised a wall of errors and worries between me and the destiny that providence showed me, they have made useless the gifts of God.] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 270)

Sab rejects the notion of a natural or divine difference between himself and free white men, casting the blame instead on the men who benefit from slavery as those who have denied God's will for his destiny. Although Sab shies away from revolutionary declarations—notably, in a conversation with Teresa, he states plainly that he will not be a rallying cry for revolt and that no danger threatens the established order—his letter appears to hint in that direction.

However, some argue that the abolitionist message of the novel is undercut by its feminist turn. Claudette Williams' article "Cuban Anti-slavery Narrative through Postcolonial Eyes: Getrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*" (2008), problematizes the comparison made—most notably by Sab in his letter—between the condition of slaves and the condition of free women. Sab, speaking on the situational similarities, says:

¡Oh! ¡las mujeres! Como los esclavos, ellas arrastran pacientemente su cadena y bajan la cabeza bajo el yugo de las leyes humanas. Sin otra guía que su corazón ignorante y crédulo eligen un dueño para toda la vida. El esclavo, al menos, puede cambiar de amo, puede esperar que juntando oro comprará algún día su libertad: pero la mujer, cuando levanta sus manos enflaquecidas y su frente ultrajada, para pedir libertad, oye al monstruo de la voz sepulcral que le grita: 'En la tumba'. [Oh! Women! Like slaves, they patiently drag their chains and let their heads droop under the yoke of human laws. With only their ignorant heart and credulous heart as a guide, they choose a master for their whole lives. The slave, at least, can change masters, can hope that by saving up money he can buy his freedom someday: but woman, when she lifts her weakened hands and outraged face, to ask for freedom, she hears the monster with a sepulchral voice that shouts: 'In the grave'.] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 271)

Williams argues that this sudden shift to the feminist message overshadows the abolitionist tilt and reduces its importance, "consigning the slavery issue to a lower place on the novel's ideological agenda" (2008, p. 170). Furthermore, Williams (2008) points out that the novel portrays a rather privileged slave, who is not only owned by a family that is shown to be benevolent towards their slaves but also, within that family, serves as a *mayoral* (something akin to an overseer) which is a position generally reserved for free men. By showing a privileged slave and by failing to address the financial and racial privilege of its female protagonists, the novel is in a better position to draw a connection between the two that would be much more problematic on a larger cultural plane. The connection that both the novel and the character Sab make between the status of slaves and of women strengthens the connection between Sab himself and Teresa that underpins the haunting of the novel, since this connection allows for the letter that is passed between them and which performs Sab's haunting. Additionally, the explicit written connection quoted above ultimately allows for Teresa's appropriation of the text and allows her to haunt alongside Sab.

While Sab is certainly a privileged slave, due in large part to his probable genetic tie to the Bellavista family, the estate's other slaves are next to invisible. Williams calls them,

“no more than a phantom presence” (2008, p. 160), since they appear only occasionally and in service to the appearances of their masters. She calls this absence a “contextual vacuum” within which Sab’s letter exists. In line with previous Derridean analyses of meaning and writing, context would have to provide meaning to the letter and Williams argues that sufficient context does not exist within the novel. Schlau also mentions in passing, the “specter of physical slavery” (1986, p. 498), which is referenced in the novel through the painful separation between Sab’s mind, or his ambitions and feelings; and his body, or his social position as defined by his physical self. This indication that slavery is a specter rather than an actual presence is significant. That Sab is a slave remains evident, but because his position is not that of the typical slave, the view of slavery offered by the novel cannot be typical or all-inclusive. If we are not provided with a complete depiction of slave life, but rather only with the life of a privileged slave, our context is flawed and the abolitionist meaning we apply to the letter will be weakened.

Though I hesitate to say that the abolitionist message of the novel is completely overshadowed or subordinated by its feminism, it is clear that the reader is meant to view the two forms of oppression in tandem. This is echoed in the relationship between Sab and Teresa, who are united by their status as outsiders but who are also recognized as profoundly different, as evidenced when Sab writes to Teresa: “Vuestro corazón es del más puro oro, el mío es de fuego” [Your heart is made of pure gold, mine is made of fire] (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1997, p. 266). Sab and Teresa are different because their hearts are, but they are united in that they are not made of muscle. While the forces that isolate them and mark them as outsiders may be different, the fact is that each is definitely marginalized. Teresa can accept her status as an outsider and even isolate herself further from the family and society to which she doesn’t quite belong by entering a convent. Meanwhile, despite the fact that Sab points out that a slave could hope for freedom to escape his subordinate situation (while women, once married, are stuck in the institution until they reach the grave), he is the one who rejects freedom and must die to escape, while Teresa, perhaps in a deliberate attempt to avoid the institution of marriage, exercises what little agency is afforded her and enters into the only other acceptable institution for women: a convent (Martinez-Alier, 1989, p. 5).

Once Teresa has committed herself to the convent, she too has joined an institution that only death will allow her to escape. She, like Sab, sees that the only way to transcend her system of oppression is through the power of the letter. By embracing its contents and turning the letter into a sort of talisman that guides her, Teresa does what Derrida urges: “to speak *to* the specter, to speak with it, therefore especially *to make or to let* a spirit *speak*” (1993, p. 11). We must speak to our ghosts and, more importantly, allow them to

speak to us, so that we may understand the reasons for which they have returned and integrate their stories and words into our understandings of the world. Teresa does this to such an extent, becoming dependent and deeply entangled in the letter, that she makes herself a part of it. She recognizes, as she did in life, her sameness and communion with Sab; she joins his haunting.

Absence, Presence, and the Ghost

We must understand this novel as a ghost story on two levels: we must recognize Sab's (and later Teresa's) haunting within the novel but also his haunting external to the constructed world of the novel. The ghost story serves a particular purpose as a social and cultural phenomenon, which, according to Gordon, is to "[put] life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look" and to "repair representational mistakes" and "strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory for the future" (2008, p. 22). In other words, ghost stories make present a narrative that has been left out; the representational mistake is often a representational *void*. Sab, by making himself present—even during his absolute absence—by way of the written letter, transgresses a boundary imposed by death. He undoes his own absence by haunting.

Gordon implores us to examine our conception of the dichotomy between invisibility and visibility, explaining that hypervisibility can be posited as a species of invisibility but that the opposite may also be true and something invisible "can indeed be a seething presence" (Gordon, 2008, p. 17). He suggests an almost inherently ghost-like quality of the oppressed, who exist between a space of visibility and invisibility and therefore between presence and absence. This is certainly true for Sab, who appears to be an important and valued element of the Bellavista family's home life while simultaneously remaining invisible to Carlota in a romantic context. Teresa, too, is a member of the family, but one who does not hold the same financial privilege or marriage prospects as her cousin, thereby rendering her outside and, on some level, absent from the family to which she belongs. In life, then, it would appear that both Sab and Teresa were physically present and still somehow absent, and as he crosses into death, his interstitial position shifts and yet remains in the in-between: he becomes a figure that is physically absent and still somehow present.

Sab's return is an indication that something has been left out. His haunting repairs the representational mistake of the absence of his story in the larger history. Teresa, as she joins Sab's haunting through her possession and transmission of the letter, indicates that

her story also goes untold. The narratives that are left out of history are those that are underprivileged; they are voices without the power to speak. The fact that Sab's haunting is enacted through the written word is incredibly important; his narrative is now recorded much in the same way that an official historical narrative would be, in exactly the type of letter that could, in some potential future, become a primary source document and touchstone in the creation of an official history. By writing himself down, he inserts himself into the privileged narrative of history, and in doing so, questions its truth and its stability in the same way that his existence out of time questions linearity.

In our final images of the haunted Carlota, she has become a ghost herself, presiding over the cemetery where Sab is buried. This is an inevitable conclusion, as to be haunted also means, in some way, to haunt. Alexander Nemerov tells us: "Historiography is in fact a form of haunting—of the past haunting the present, as much as it is the present's haunting of the past" (2013, p. 482). As we begin to accept the stories of ghosts into our histories and our understandings of the world around us, we cast ourselves back as figures from the present haunting the past. After Carlota reads Sab's letter and is brought out of her naiveté into a sort of enlightenment, she must return to the past and "reread her romance in light of what could have been" (Sommer, 1993, p. 116). We do the same with *Sab*. The eponymous slave haunts through his letter and we must integrate his epistolary story into our understanding. In doing so, in searching for context of his signs and his signature inherent in the pages, I haunt him back, tying my time inexorably to his and confirming the debt that our temporalities owe each other. With writing, which inherently plays between presence and absence, we cross time and create narratives of haunting.

References

- Botting, F. (1996). *Gothic*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Burke, E. (1757). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. London, UK: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, in Pall-Mall.
- Castricano, C. J. (2001). *Cryptomimesis: the gothic and Jacques Derrida's ghost writing*. Montréal, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Davies, C. (2003). The Gift in "Sab." *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 22(2), 46–53.
- Derrida, J. (1988). Signature Event Context. In *Limited Inc*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1993). *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. (P. Kamuf, Trans.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gómez de Avellaneda, G. (1997). *Sab*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra.
- Gordon, A. (2008). *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hart, S. M. (1999). *A Companion to Spanish-American Literature*. London, UK: Tamesis.
- Hogle, J. (2002). *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Iser, W. (1972). The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach. *New Literary History*, 3(2), 279-299.
- Keller, P. M. (2016). *Ghostly Landscapes: Film, Photography, and the Aesthetics of Haunting in Contemporary Spanish Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Martinez-Alier, V. (1989). *Marriage, Class, and Colour in Nineteenth-century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Nemerov, A. (2013). Seeing Ghosts: The Turn of the Screw and Art History. In M. del Pilar Blanco & E. Peeren (Eds.), *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (pp. 527–547). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1938). *Literature as exploration*. New York, NY: D. Appleton-Century Company.
- Schlau, S. (1986). Stranger in a Strange Land: The Discourse of Alienation in Gómez de Avellaneda's Abolitionist Novel Sab. *Hispania*, 69(3), 495–503.
- Sommer, D. (1993). Sab C'est Moi. In *Foundational fictions: the national romances of Latin America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Weinstock, J. A. (2013). Introduction: The Spectral Turn. In M. del Pilar Blanco & E. Peeren (Eds.), *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (pp. 61–68). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Williams, C. (2008). Cuban Anti-slavery Narrative through Postcolonial Eyes: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's Sab. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 27(2), 155–175.