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Carmen Salama
High Point University

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Between Subject and Object: The Identity of a Slave in Juan Francisco Manzano's Autobiography

Carmen Salama

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore how the oscillation between violence and benevolence by the patriarchal master marks the dual status of the slave as the subject-object. This duplicity exists not only in the identity of the slave but also in the identity of Cuban society in the Cuban abolitionist narrative of the 19th century. My research focuses on the abolitionist work *La Autobiografía de un Esclavo* (1835) by Juan Francisco Manzano. Expanding the post-colonial approach of academics such as Claudette Williams and Lorna Williams, first I analyze the limits of property rights over the slave imposed by the Catholic church and the law in connection with the fluctuations between violent acts and benevolent acts done by the master. Then I study the impact of these constant violations of law in the figure of the protagonist. My research shows that, although the owner is the executor of acts of cruelty, both the Church and the law protected/sanctioned this punitive prerogative of the master. While it is true that both institutions controlled the violence by regulating the master/slave relationship, neither of them questioned or intervened effectively. Moreover, I suggest that the demonstrations of benevolence were a pretense that covered a more perverse reality; there is no law, no church, no mercy in favor of the slave. It also shows how the oscillation between benevolence and violence marks the identity of the slave. The good treatment obscured but did not erase the condition of the slave as an object. The slave acting in this capacity as a thing was obligated not only to serve but to suffer the capricious wrath of the master's changing mood.

One of the most relevant aspects in anti-slavery literature revolves around the portrayal of the slave as a weak, martyred, and abused character, either due to the physical suffering inflicted on him/her by forced labor or because of the violence with which he/she is generally treated. According to the logic of victimization, the slave's oppressed position is further exacerbated when he/she has an emotional disorder that prevents him from exercising a dignified role in society. Critics have argued that slave narratives had three fundamental objectives: to warn and convince the reader that slavery should be abolished; to demonstrate and demand respect for slaves as human beings; and, lastly, to promote the construction of a more humane

society. By exploring the processes of slave victimization in depth, the reader understands that Cuban anti-slavery narratives not only present the dark side of violence and threats, but also the representation of benevolence or acts of goodwill through the figures of the master as father, the Church as protector, and the law as defender of the slave. For example, Sab, the eponymous character of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's slave narrative, boasts about the good treatment he has always received from his masters when he says, "Yes, sir, I have never suffered the harsh treatment that is generally given to blacks, nor have I been sentenced to lengthy and tiring work" (Gómez de Avellaneda, 1841, p. 9). *Sab* demonstrates how acts of violence and benevolence are used to portray the life of a slave in fictional form.

The *Autobiography of a Slave* by Juan Francisco Manzano is one of the first anti-slavery narratives produced in Cuba.¹ The text recounts the pain and misfortune that Manzano suffered while enslaved. Manzano wrote his autobiography at the request of Domingo del Monte, initiator of Cuba's national literature, with the purpose of exposing the injustices of slavery in Cuba. The original text was edited by Anselmo Suárez y Romero and published by the Englishman Richard Madden in London in 1840 under the title *History of the Early Life of the Negro Poet*; it was not until 1937 that the text was published in Cuba by José Luciano Franco under the title the *Autobiography of a Slave*. The text's publication history has led some critics to denounce its authenticity. These critics argue that the text was modified, corrected, and translated to meet abolitionist objectives.² In fact, many scholars do not consider the publication an autobiographical text since its content was adapted to the political, economic, social, and racial interests of the time. Nevertheless, "it remains, in historical retrospect, as one of the founding texts of Cuban literature" (Bremer, 2010, p. 416).

The *Autobiography* narrates how the slave develops under ambivalent treatment. During the early years of his life, the slave receives generous and compassionate treatment from his first mistress, Doña Beatriz de Jústiz; yet, his adolescence is marked by innumerable abuses suffered at the hands of the Marquise of Prado Ameno. In this article, I analyze episodes of violence against and benevolence towards Manzano within the context of law and religion. I argue that the tensions inherent in the disparate treatment of Manzano are engendered by the law and the Church and have the effect of splitting the enslaved protagonist's identity—he comes to occupy a space somewhere between subject and object.

The Church and the Law

What power did the Church have over slavery? Could the Church really have been considered a benevolent entity in the face of the injustices wrought by this institution? At the turn of the 19th century, Spain profited from the sugar boom and

¹ Other anti-slavery works include *Francisco* by Anselmo Suárez y Romero; *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde; and *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.

² When Suárez y Romero edited the *Autobiography*, he took control of the piece. See Suárez y Romero's letter to Del Monte, in which he suggests how a life story should be told (Williams, 1994, pp. 26-28).

the slave economy of Cuba. Ecclesiastical institutions and their representatives participated in, rather than decried, this economy and its reliance on slave labor. According to historians, while the Church sought to catechize the African blacks, it also approved and engaged in the negotiation and exploitation of slaves. As “Domingo Delmonte argued, the clergy owned slaves and mistreated them like any landlord” (Maza Miguel, 1999, p. 99). They did not see the black man as a human being; rather, they considered him property. Even some contemporary historians such as Franklin Knight, based on testimonials from visitors to the island, have reiterated that there were priests who broke their promise of celibacy and had relations with women of color³ (Maza Miguel, 1999, p. 100).

Like the Church, the law focused on restricting the behavior of whites and blacks, owners and slaves. The Spanish Bourbon monarchy was in charge of controlling the masters’ exercise of power preventing practices that could threaten the security of the State. By 1842, Cuba had a slave population of 436,495, the highest number of the entire century, which prompted Spain to implement a slave code, dictated by Governor Jerónimo Valdés, capable of controlling conspiracies, the multiplication of Maroons, and acts of rebellion (Martínez, 2016, p. 91). The code, titled the *Cuban Slave Regulations of 1842*, required masters to provide food, clothing, medical assistance, shelter, and blankets to their slaves, with the understanding that these necessities would ensure public and social order. The code also allowed for a slave’s freedom under legally justified circumstances and based on meritorious reasons (Article 40). In addition, these regulations required slave owners to teach the Catholic religion to their slaves, and slaves to receive the sacrament of baptism (Article 1). The regulations also required masters to instill in their slaves a reverence for priests and respect for white people (Article 5). It was convenient for the State to maintain the slave-Church relationship since, through religion, it was easier to promote oppression, achieve obedience, and justify violence enacted against the slave.

Let us see how the institutional presence of the Church and the law transpire in the *Autobiography* by Manzano. The slave Manzano, whose exact date of birth is unknown, is the son of Toribio Manzano and María Pilar Infanzón. As part of the slave-owning tradition, he receives the surname of his master, Juan Manzano, and spends the early years of his life in a quiet environment where he is assigned to domestic service. As a result, Manzano unlike other slaves, has a certain level of education, and stands out in manual crafts, such as tailoring.

According to the *Autobiography*, the slave begins to live his true agony at approximately 12 years of age, when he passes into the hands of his second mistress, María de la Concepción Valdés, the Marquise of Prado Ameno: “The true story of my life begins at 18, 19 in which fortune unfolded against me to the point of greatest fury, as we will see” (Manzano, 2007, p. 87). At this young age, Manzano was subjected to his owner’s violence: “here after being heavily flogged, they would put me in order and punish anyone who gave me a drop of water [...] I would scream

³ Manuel Maza Miguel summarizes how the Catholic church provided norms of conduct in the slave-owning society, acting in support of personal interests that promote the exercise of its power.

so loud asking for mercy [...] then they would lock me up again” (Manzano, 2007, p. 87). At the same time, he recalls the days when he was treated with benevolence: “she treated me like a white child, dressed me, combed my hair and made sure I did not get in contact with the other black children ...” (Manzano, 2007, p. 87). This double condition of being treated as a *white* child and at the same time as a black slave structures his autobiographical narrative.

From a very early age, Manzano is under the domain of Mr. Manuel Manzano, Marquis of Jústiz de Santa Ana, and Mrs. Beatriz de Jústiz, Marquise of Jústiz de Santa Ana. He recounts that, during this stage of his life, good treatment, and generosity reigned—his greatest obligation was to provide company to his mistress, from whom he separated only to sleep. When speaking of his mistress, Manzano describes her as a generous soul, who showed gratitude to the people dedicated to serving her. To illustrate, he recounts the circumstances of his baptism, claiming that on that day he wore the same christening gown in which his mistress was baptized, and that his kind mistress gave money to the slave’s parents as a gift (Manzano, 2007, p. 85).

While these acts of benevolence, on their face, appear to mitigate Manzano’s suffering and suggest his value as a human subject, they did not, in practice, erase his condition as a *thing*. In fact, the manifestations of benevolence merely concealed another, more perverse reality. The slave owner exploits the slave not only for the economic benefits, but sometimes also for fun. Manzano is aware of this and when describing that part of his childhood, he affirms, “my mistress took me as a kind of entertainment” (Manzano, 2007, p. 84). The slave observes how he serves as an object of decoration, or an object of amusement, and not as a human being of great intelligence and potential, as he believed himself to be. The care that he later recalls with such melancholy, resembles the same care that is given to objects of value or luxury, the possession of which is necessary to satisfy the white man’s image of power and prestige. Manzano observes, from the perspective of the slave society, that “the slave would be converted into a non-person depending exclusively on the will of his master and the frameworks that the dominant society gave him” (San Martín, 2013, p. 166).

When recalling his time with his second mistress, María de la Concepción Valdés, Marquise of Prado Ameno, Manzano describes in detail the violence and the severe punishments to which he was constantly subjected. He also remembers with great nostalgia the acts of benevolence that he received from people who pitied him when he was mistreated. For example, he remembers the mercy of Señor Nicolás and his brothers who, on several occasions, gave him bread and water while he endured long hours of confinement and hunger; the doctor of the hacienda, Don Estorino, whom he portrays as an understanding, wise, and generous man; Miss Beatriz Cárdenas, a merciful mistress who asked for compassion when his master ordered to tie him up; or the kindness of Mr. D. Alejandro Montono, cadet of the *Mananzas militia*, who fed him during the most difficult times.

In addition to these manifestations of benevolence, Manzano finds a source of comfort in the Catholic religion. He repeatedly describes his spirituality and attachment to religion, and he portrays the Church as another agent of mercy and humanity. From a young age, the slave knew the whole catechism, and he constantly

prayed with great faith that the next day would not be as bad as the previous one.⁴ Although Manzano believed the Church to be merciful and humane, it acted otherwise. Manzano recollects that on one occasion his biological father disciplined him in a very hard way: “My father shook me, but really hard” (Manzano, 2007, p. 84). Father Moya, a clergyman from San Francisco, interferes in the situation and claims that both the mistress and the father had equal rights to punish the child. The clergyman, who is supposed to embody mercy and kindness, reinforces social and familial norms regarding punitive measures against children.

In the *Autobiography*, readers will also observe how this law that presumed benevolence, was also supposed to be impartial and detached from the pain or physical and moral integrity of the slave. Manzano describes how his mistress, Mrs. Beatriz de Jústiz, grants freedom to the next descendant of her slave María Pilar Infanzón, Manzano’s mother: “But that very kind Lady, inexhaustible source of grace, renewed a document offering her the freedom of the next birth, regardless of what was born. And male and female twins were born ...” (Manzano, 2007, p. 85). Manzano also says that the court ruled to free both children, arguing that both were formed in the same womb.

In contrast, this law, which claimed to be benevolent, also authorized violence against the slave. Manzano narrates an instance when he was so afraid of being whipped that he decided to run to the village and take refuge in the house of the Lord Count of Jibacoa. From there, “a commissioner tied me up in the courtroom and took me to the public jail at eleven o’clock in the day: at four o’clock came a white young man from the country and demanded me [...] and they skinned me right there ...” (Manzano, 2007, p. 108). The judicial authority did not question the use of violence with which the slave is disciplined.

When exploring the violence in the *Autobiography*, the law stipulated that slaves were obliged to obey and respect their owners and other superiors, and if they failed in any of their obligations, it was appropriate to punish them. Article 41 of the *Cuban Slave Regulations of 1842* stipulated the punishment, and specified how it should be executed: “with prison, shackle, chain, mace or stocks, where he shall be placed by the feet, and never by the head, or with lashes that cannot exceed the number of twenty-five” (p. 299). As for the Church, applying by analogy the content of the 18th-century Mexican manuscript on *Instructions to Jesuit Brothers* (1950)⁵, it too approved of punitive action against slaves thereby showing itself detached from the physical and moral damage that could have been caused to the slave. Article 45 of the *Instructions to Jesuit Brothers* (1950) recommended that the punishment had to be used immediately, since fear and threat could induce the slave

⁴ The religious catechization that Manzano received led him to think that his lack of religiosity made him worthy of punishments: “And if any of the common and painful judgement happened, I attributed it only to my lack of devotion, or to the anger of some saint I had forgotten” (Manzano, 2007, p. 103).

⁵ Among other things, the Jesuit brothers were responsible for the evangelization of slaves on the haciendas through the teaching of Christian doctrine. See *Slavery, economy, and evangelization: Jesuit haciendas in viceregal America*, Sandra Negro Tua and Manuel María Marzal.

to escape: “What you must do is to conceal them, and if this cannot be done, rebuke them meekly without threat, and when you have them secured, then punish them” (p. 70).

By identifying the master as the executor of these acts of cruelty, and we recognize that both the Church and the law protect the prerogative of the master. Neither the Church nor the law questions violence against the slave; in fact, both institutions try to control it. The law allowed for the physical punishment of slaves in order to maintain the master-slave hierarchy and the Church supported the law’s objective by instructing slaves to accept their punishment if they want to be redeemed by God—both the law and religion pursued the master’s and the state’s interests.

Between Subject and Object

How does this double treatment of violence and benevolence—supported by the Church and the law—transgress the physical and emotional integrity of the slave Juan Francisco Manzano? Caught between object and subject, Manzano reflects on his condition, looking for the reason for his experiences. For example, in the *Autobiography*, the slave analyzes his appearance and physical condition, claiming that his size and weakness were due to the bitter life he had led: “always skinny exhausted I carried in my face the pallor of a convalescent with such big ears” (Manzano, 2007, p. 88). Likewise, he reflects on his emotional exhaustion, which was caused by the indifference of the society, and describes how he relieved his pain. Manzano says that crying and loneliness helped him to unleash his sorrows: “music enraptured me without knowing why: I cried and liked the consolation of finding an opportunity to cry” (Manzano, 2007, p. 88), and he complains that his heart was sick from so much suffering the cruel treatment of slavery.

Here, I further explore Manzano’s narrative, highlighting how the autobiographical tale poses other situations where the physical and emotional damage, derived from the ambiguity of treatment, goes beyond the reflections and the facts exposed by the narrator. The silences and the pauses in the narration, together with the slave’s feelings of confusion and insecurity, manifest the damage omitted in the text.

The silences and pauses in the narrative to which I refer occur when Manzano interrupts his stories, thereby leaving the outcome of the events uncertain: “Let us continue, let us go in silence through the rest of this painful scene” (Manzano, 2007, p. 93). Some critics have considered these silences as a defense mechanism used by Domingo del Monte to guarantee the safety of the author-protagonist⁶ (Campuzano, 2015, p. 156). Others insinuate that this omission represents Manzano’s willingness to leave behind episodes of his life that would have compromised his reputation and sexuality. For example, Robert Richmond Ellis (1998) observes that the rape of slaves of both sexes was a common practice in slave-owning societies, and he interprets certain silences in the *Autobiography* as markers of the protagonist’s experiences as a victim of sexual abuse:

⁶ Campuzano suggests that Manzano’s omission and silences work as strategies that the author uses to adjust to colonial dynamics. His silence is the defense of the enslaved.

Manzano never explicitly articulates the rape of either men or women, yet there are two telling passages in the *Autobiography* (one involving his mother and one involving him) where he begins to reveal a terrifying episode of torture and then draws a veil over the scene. This veil denotes a gap in the autobiographical narrative—an empty space that silences a truth but wherein unspeakable truth of rape (in Manzano’s case, male-male rape) might at last be uttered. (p. 422)

While Ellis’s argument is compelling, there is no historical documentation that proves Manzano or his mother were sexually assaulted. Thus, I would argue that Manzano’s silence arises out of the impossibility of representing the depth of the slave’s terror and pain.

I will also explore how the ambivalent treatment of Manzano has generated a conflict regarding the position of the slave in front of both the black individual and the white individual. On repeated occasions, the slave narrates that during his childhood he was not allowed to interact with other blacks, thus presuming his condition as domestic servant and intellectual character. In the *Autobiography*, Manzano (2007) reveals that at a young age he received special treatment that differentiated him from other children of color: “... Mrs. Doña Joaquina, who treated me like a white child, dressed me, combed my hair and made sure I did not touch the other black children” (p. 87). This *special* treatment from Manzano’s master was motivated by Joaquina’s perception of the Manzano boy as a toy and object of entertainment. That is to say, in the world of whites, this child has an object status. The curious thing is that this idea of distancing Manzano from other blacks emerges not only from the figure of the master, but also from a slave, Manzano’s (2007) own father: “My father was somewhat proud and never allowed kids in his house, but not even for his children to play with the black children of the Hacienda ...” (p. 115).

These differences in color and treatment engendered feelings of confusion within Manzano at an early age, and these feelings triggered conflicts and ideological claims. Manzano feels like a subject, as opposed to an object, and perhaps that is why he insists on learning to write, despite the fact that his master, Don Nicolás, asked him on several occasions to abandon pursuits that did not correspond to his condition and class. In that same sense, Manzano not only learns to write, but also challenges himself to imitate the handwriting of the neoclassical poet Juan Bautista Arriaza. In this instance, the slave not only pretends to behave like a white man, but also wants to write like an intellectual. Ocasio (2012) writes, “Manzano shared the traits of a ‘White Negro’ [...] Manzano’s demeanor as a refined mulato not only made him behave like a White man but also to write as a Cuban intellectual would have” (p. 62)⁷. If he wanted to be black among whites, he had to follow the communication rules of white society.

⁷ Ocasio adds that Manzano’s closeness to the members of Del Monte’s circle encouraged him to behave like a white man.

Likewise, by learning to read and write, Manzano tries to cast aside the condition of an object and position himself as a subject. The slave sees beyond freedom, expecting to be recognized by the whites as a thinker, writer, and poet. Manzano's behavior and his reaction to this ambivalent situation demonstrates his ingenuity and resourcefulness. It can be interpreted as both an act of rebellion and a failure to understand the Cuban society of the 19th century. The slave believes himself superior to the rest of the slaves and aspires to be recognized by white society for developing a skill set connected to white culture; he does not realize that this situation does not change his racial condition.

As a last point, when exploring the outcome of the *Autobiography*, it appears that Manzano's confusion is not the only feeling that overwhelms the protagonist. His struggle to deserve a place in society, and to gain intellectual recognition is accompanied by fear and insecurity. These feelings make the slave hesitate when making decisions that promise to transform definitively the course of his story. Thus, it is important to analyze briefly the circumstances that accompany the episode of his escape.

Manzano describes how a free servant, who used to empathize with Manzano's suffering, tries to persuade him to escape. In his attempt to convince Manzano, the servant praises Manzano's attributes, emphasizing everything that differentiates him from the rest of the slaves. The servant praises him: "A refined mulato with as many abilities as you" (Manzano, 2007, p. 114). Manzano was clear that slaves had two basic ways to obtain freedom: they could procure it from their masters or search for it themselves. However, Manzano (2007), as he states, "feared more than usual" (p. 114). Certainly, he was terrified to hear the servant's insinuations, that in turn made him hesitate. For the slave, one fear generated another fear. Not being able to escape represented the greatest of his fears, since he knew his sad destiny as a slave, and escaping led to fear and uncertainty about the possibility of stumbling upon something worse than what he was already living. Finally, using his courage, the slave makes his escape, taking with him the emotional trauma generated by an ambivalence of treatment common in a slave society. Of course, it is logical to think that his escape and his freedom did not relieve him of racial and social discrimination.

Conclusion

By exploring the different acts of violence and benevolence present in the *Autobiography of a slave*, and analyzing the role of the Church and the law in connection with the limits of the master's right of property over the slave, I suggest that the manifestations of benevolence were an appearance that covered another, more perverse reality. Occasional good treatment minimized, but did not erase, the slave's object condition. The slave, considered as a thing, was obligated to serve and live subject to the whims and needs of the master. Moreover, the master's punitive prerogative—often invoked when the slave failed to serve and live as expected—was protected by both the Church and the law. Although it is true that both institutions controlled violence by regulating the master-slave relationship, neither one of them questioned it, or intervened effectively.

The fluctuations between violent and benevolent acts suggest that this ambivalence generates a pernicious internal conflict within Manzano—he sometimes forgets his position as a slave and instead sees himself as superior to his enslaved community. Manzano feels that he has reached a level of intellectual merit that would allow him to participate in white society; however, he recognizes that his color makes it impossible for him to exercise that right. Manzano could not define his identity within the framework of white society or as a member of the African-slave community.

The *Autobiography* of Manzano was written at the request of Domingo Del Monte with the intention of contributing to the process of the abolition of slavery in Cuba, but the author Manzano takes advantage of this opportunity and dedicates himself to showing his intellectual attributes, seeking to achieve not only his freedom but also acceptance as a person in a society where the black individual was considered an object of use, enjoyment, and pleasure. Finally, the aspirations of the slave Manzano are the result of an identity conflict generated by the ambiguity of treatment he received from the moment he was born. Having been born black yet treated like a white child created anguish in a man who had to suffer the injustices of a slave society.

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