

## **“A Slave is a Dead Soul”** **Amado Lascar**

Juan Francisco Manzano was the first slave in the Americas to publish while still in servitude. Beyond the quality, or the interest that Negro literature could have provoked during his lifetime, many forces (political, historical, economical, racial, etc.) had to collide. We must not forget that slavery is by definition a state of silence. The sentence “a slave is a dead soul,” written by Manzano in his *Autobiografía*, is one of his most beautiful linguistic syntheses of his captivity, but it is a problematic statement. On the one hand it is very poetic and dramatic, and it represents what the master expects from any piece of property—certainly those parts of his or her property that provide the revenue on a regular basis. If this is one of the most powerful statements of the *Autobiografía*, it is powerful because it represents what people considered the core of slavery: a barbaric negation of the self.

This is true, but only in part. It is especially true if we want to represent passivity and lack of will for rebellion. If the slave is a dead soul the slave is not a threat. It is different to say that the slave is a tortured soul, because the connotations suggest that even if the soul is on its way to destruction, it is still alive.

Manzano first published his *Poesías líricas* in 1821, then *Flores pasajeras* in 1830, both in Havana. He could only publish these texts with the support and solicitation of a group of white men of letters, slaveholders themselves. The most influential of these intellectuals was Domingo del Monte, Venezuelan by birth; son of one of the Judiciary officers of the Crown; husband of one of the richest women in Cuba; and himself an owner of one hundred slaves by 1840. Domingo Del Monte’s help had two dimensions in Manzano’s production. On the one hand he allowed Manzano to be known as a writer; on the other hand the writing of Manzano was controlled by politics that stopped him from making a more comprehensive representation and judgment of slavery. According to Richard Jackson:

The influential Cuban group, which was led by Domingo Del Monte, dictated, for example, the man’s “portrait of the slave,” that is, they gave the slave a meek image, the only one deemed acceptable and able to escape censorship during the first half of the nineteenth century (*Black Writers in Latin America*, 25). The meek image of the slave corresponded to the image of a domestic slave, not the slave of the sugar field and *barracones* (living quarters for the slaves). That is, it represented the minority of ‘well-off’ slaves, working and living with their masters.

In 1837 Manzano finished his *Autobiography of a Slave*, the work for which he would be best known. The first part of this work was published in England in 1840 through the intervention of Richard Madden, a British officer in charge of the prosecution of the violators of the slave trade in the Caribbean. The *Autobiography* was not published in its original Spanish until a 1936 version in Madrid, almost one hundred years later. Although the *Autobiography* was not edited in Spanish until the next century, Del Monte’s group circulated it among themselves, influencing the way the Black subject was portrayed in

nineteenth-century Cuban literature.

After Domingo del Monte bought Manzano's freedom for five hundred pesos, Manzano published the play *Zafira* in 1842. This final work of Manzano's contrasted in many ways with his former writings, not only in form and content, but also in the way that he represented power. In 1844 an event occurred that Spanish Cuban colonial authorities claimed was a significant uprising organized to overthrow the Spaniards on the Island. They pointed to Plácido, another of Domingo del Monte's black poets, as the brain of the uprising. He was summarily judged and executed. Manzano was also charged with conspiracy and jailed for years until he managed to prove his innocence. Finally Domingo del Monte was also prosecuted and sentenced with exile. So, after this Escalera affair, Del Monte's tertulia group was disbanded, the most promising black poet killed, Manzano never wrote (or at least published) again, and Del Monte never managed to return to Cuba, dying in Spain in 1853.

The effects of Del Monte's exile and his positive and active intervention in the creation of a Cuban national literature have made many critics, historians and politicians consider Domingo del Monte a great humanist, opponent of the slave-trade and a champion of abolition. The political context in which he lived, however, points to other relevant factors that affected Cuban landholding society in general, and inevitably had an impact on Domingo del Monte's projects. He was a sugar plantation owner, with the knowledge (and resultant fear) of the slave uprising in Haiti in 1791, which led to the first Black Republic of America in 1804. He also experienced the 1812 Aponte Conspiracy, a major slave revolt in Cuba's history.

Del Monte wanted a smooth transition for Cuba from slavery to freedom without hurting the interests of his class. Like many other criollo liberal intellectuals, he wanted this smooth process for the transformation of the colonial Cuba into the Republic of Cuba. Unlike some groups of slaveholders who advocated alliances with the Southern United States' slave economy, he was against American annexation, but he never promoted insurrection. Indeed, Del Monte worked on the educational project hand-in-hand with the Crown before he was accused of conspiracy. His views on slaves and blackness are widely documented:

A man who was born and raised in slavery, whatever race or color he belongs to, has by the very condition of his situation to be despicable, stupid and immoral; it belongs as much to his essence to have these defects, as to the sun to give light and to solid bodies to find their center of gravity when they are thrown into space. Although he talks about "whatever race or color a slave belongs to," we have to remember that in his time only blacks were slaves. Furthermore, although he rhetorically frames slaves in their condition in a structural fashion ("situation"), the essentialism is decisive when he compares the slave's condition with the sun and the natural forces of gravity. His or her condition becomes part of nature, divinely ordained.

For the honor of human nature [he adds in the next paragraph], indeed, there are races like the Ethiopian, where we can find some generous exceptions to this rule, but they are not

able to change it, because it would be to disarrange the admirable order that the Providence has set into the world 2. This is the same man who helped the black slave Francisco Manzano write about slavery. The same man who was condemned into exile and never set foot on the Island again. The threatened and defensive sugar field owners that blamed him for collaborating with the enemy (the slaves) expelled him. Nonetheless, it will be clear for the reader at the end of this article, that Del Monte's project for Cuba was quite different from Manzano's.

To leave no trace of a doubt about Del Monte's plans for Cuba and black people, I quote him again:

[...] Cuba will finally persuade itself that its illness comes from black slavery: that neither this abominable institution nor this miserable race match the advancements of the European culture: that the work, the unique attempt, the constant purpose of all wholehearted Cubans of noble and holy patriotism is to record and eliminate the trade first, and then ruthlessly suppress slavery without trembling hand and violence, and finally to cleanse Cuba of the African race 3.

As an intellectual he tried to follow this plan by working with Richard Madden to help to eliminate the trade—his initial step towards the whitening of Cuba. That is why he worked with Manzano and edited his work so many times, to make it acceptable for European and elite audiences. He even appointed Anselmo Suárez y Romero as a direct editor to censor Manzano's *Autobiografía*. Suárez not only edited the language and determined the eventual social critique in the *Autobiografía*, he also produced the newly created literary tradition of the meek black slave writer, with his own work *Francisco* in 1840.

This harmlessness of this new literary style introduced in the *Autobiografía* becomes evident when Manzano, instead of addressing the institution of slavery and judging the evils of bondage and the trade in humans, shows Marquesa de Prado Ameno's inhumane abuse of him. This sadistic woman tortures Francisco, with her own hands or by her agent's. They torture Francisco Manzano psychologically, physically and even sexually (it is implied). In this way, the writing redirects the rage against the abusive system towards a person, not towards the institution. Such a rhetorical move allows slavery to be open for improvement, and thus perpetuates it.

These manifold "editions" of Manzano's *Autobiografía* (by the British Crown, the Slaveholders, Del Monte's Circle, and himself) turned the autobiography into a limited and distorted source of information about slavery as such. Nonetheless, this representation became canonical for Cuban letters and very important in the creation of blackness in Cuban literature. Lorna Williams expresses this clearly in her book *The Representation of Slavery in Cuban Fiction*:

[H]e [Del Monte] would create a new narrative space in Cuban letters and would initiate the movement that Felix Tanco, Anselmo Suárez y Romero, and others would continue by placing the voice-less at the center of their narrative enterprise. (51).

The edition and publication of Manzano's First Part of the *Autobiografía* founded what would become the canonical representation of black slaves in Cuba, and metonymically in the whole of Latin America. The second part was lost; there are several divergent theories

about its fate. There are also speculations about his self-representation in this second part. The manuscript was misplaced, lost or destroyed with or without purpose: like the degree of input that Manzano had in the first part, the fate of the second part remains a mystery. What does remain clear is that Francisco Manzano was aware of the lack of representation of blackness and slavery in his *Autobiografía*, and he explicitly acknowledged this fact in a letter written to Del Monte in September of 1835, quoted by Lorna Williams:

I have prepared myself to write down for you a part of my life's story, reserving the most interesting events of it for myself so that if some day I find myself sitting in a corner of my country, at peace, assured of my fate and livelihood, I will write a truly Cuban novel (Williams, 23).

Writing the *Autobiografía* was a complicated task for Manzano considering his position: he was still a slave, writing about slavery and handing this writing to slaveholders. Not very secure indeed. The question is whether Manzano might have really written an other kind of autobiography, a story of his life where slavery, not only individual slaveholders (but they too, of course) was the core of the problem. How might he have written such a critique?

Manzano never wrote the "truly Cuban novel" with which he aspired to contribute to the national culture during the independence era; after the events of the 1844 Escalera Uprising, he never wrote again. Manzano ended his life as a cook, not as a writer. He did write one work as a free man in 1842, before the alleged Escalera, his only play and his last work: *Zafira*. Richard Jackson acknowledges the importance and the shift of Manzano's tone in his last work, set in Mauritania at the time of the invasion of Barbaroja, a Christian usurper of a Muslim Throne:

[...] *Zafira* can be read as an allegory of Cuba, and the dissimulated expressions are similar to those we see in many "revolutionary" poems of Plácido set in foreign lands. In this play Manzano speaks of heroism and tyrants. Shouts of "kill the tyrant!" are heard. He speaks of vassals, human grief, victims, justice, liberty, and human dignity (Black Writers in Latin America, 35).

Despite its genre, *Zafira* resembles the national allegorical novels produced in the Antilles and Latin America during the independence movements, speaks to national issues and critiques society through symbolism, at different levels, in the main plot in the dialogues, and within the characters. As with other Cuban pro-independence and anti-slavery literature of the mid century, like Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* and Félix Varela's *Jicoténcal*, the tragedy of *Zafira*'s characters denounces the perpetuation of an unjust system that makes the consummation of love (and the nation) impossible.

*Zafira* dichotomously represents good and bad government, loyalty and treason, justice and oppression, and love and hatred, assigning particular importance to the necessity of recovering the lost nation from the usurpers, and restoring justice. The symbolism of *Zafira*, a Muslim woman, abused and at the mercy of the will of a Christian white man whom she did not love, relates allegorically to the situation of people of color in Cuba and their dependence upon white Christian men: the reliance on the usurper of the nation to find

justice and build the future. Zafira (the mother) cannot keep her faith in her son's ability to survive in the struggle for freedom and the retaking of their occupied homeland (her son being the native inhabitant and authentic commander). She also fails to believe that her son can defeat the usurper, a lack of faith that she demonstrates by taking her own life. If she, the allegorical mother spirit of the land, doesn't believe in her own offspring, there is no hope for the future. The spirit perishes and the native inhabitants have to leave the land as well. There is only catastrophe without reciprocal faith.

The allegorical representations of justice and good in the face of colonization, however, come across clearly. Noemi, the eunuch, is the only black character in the play, and Manzano characterizes him positively as a guard sympathetic to his charge. Colifa, Zafira's Muslim woman friend, is very brave and helps her to achieve levels of understanding that she would not have been able to achieve without her. In general terms the characters that represent justice, beauty, and wisdom are women, descendents of Mahommed, or children. The evil characters are white (Barbarroja), male, and foreign. In this way, Manzano foreshadows 20th century black Islam movements that posit Islam as a doctrine of liberation from white imperialism.

The language used by Manzano in *Zafira* is radically different to the language in the *Autobiografía*. We have little documentation about *Zafira*'s editorial, and no evidence of significant external intervention exists. The richness of expression and the complexity of the representation in the play reveal the extent to which Manzano's writing skills were hidden in the *Autobiografía* where he performs as a rough--and even a poor--narrator in his best known work, portraying the ignorant and exotic victim. Manzano not only shows an amazing ability to create dialogues and invented situations in *Zafira*, but he also shows a great capacity to allegorize and to invent symbolic worlds.

The very fact that Manzano wrote the *Autobiografía* contradicts its narrator's assertion that "a slave is a dead soul;" but Manzano was a master of disguise, and—although edited and censored—he asserted his voice while still a slave. He never confronted the institution as such, but he found literary ways to expose it.

He gained freedom against all the odds and finally went head on to find another wall in the labyrinth of privilege and injustice. He was charged with conspiracy, jailed and tortured (again). His condition of being a free man did not help him too much against the web of white power and white legality. He never could write his "truly Cuban novel." Nonetheless, *Zafira* can show Manzano's awareness of the institution of slavery and also his rage and bitterness against white society. To understand the creative writings of Manzano we have to follow the relationship between Cuban history and his own history. There is a special dialectic among his hopes, his dreams and his truths that becomes more and more intense with each work. He decided to stop writing after so many turns in the labyrinth, after so many betrayals and so many threats, but one thing I shall say about him: he never was, even in his ultimate silence, a dead soul.

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