Progressing from "mistress' lap-dog to freeman": Commemorating the Slavery Experience in the Hispanic World via the *Narrative* of Juan Francisco Manzano

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Introduction

The Narrative of Juan Francisco Manzano entitled *Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba, Recently Liberated; Translated from the Spanish, by R. R. Madden, M.D. With the History of the Early Life of the Negro Poet, Written by Himself* (1840) (henceforth: *Narrative*) is the first and only document describing slavery in Cuba (DeCosta-Willis 7). The *Narrative* first only available in Spanish was written between 1835 and 1839 and includes not only the actual experiences of the protagonist but his poems along with the verses written by the Irish abolitionist, Richard Robert Madden. Madden was initially trained as a doctor, but he became a key figure of the abolition movement in the Caribbean after his appointment to the Mixed Tribunal Court of Arbitration dealing with contested issues between Great Britain and Spain (Bremer). Hence, he was embroiled in an expected conflict with Captain General Miguel Tacón y Rosique, the leader of Spanish Cuba, from 1834 until 1836. Tacón described Madden as "a dangerous man from whatever point of view he is considered, and living in this Island he will have far too many opportunities to disseminate seditious ideas directly or indirectly, which not even my constant vigilance can prevent" (qtd. in Boutelle 147). The *Narrative i*s a unique document providing valuable bilingual insight into slavery in Cuba, or by extension, the Hispanic world.

The text offers a wealth of intriguing research opportunities for consideration. Produced while the protagonist was serving as a *falderillo,* or a house-slave, the writing was commissioned by Don Domingo del Monte, a leading Cuban slave owner himself. Moreover, while it was put down to paper in the middle of the nineteenth century, it could not be published due to Spanish censorship for almost a hundred years, until the appearance of the original Spanish version in 1937. Only the first half of the text survived, and Susan Willis considers the original Spanish version as an interior monologue (204). Indeed, the Spanish text lacks proper structuring as Madden, besides translating Manzano's *Narrative*, made formal changes as well.

Moreover, one cannot gloss over the fact that Madden does not mention the name of the author in the title. In R. J. Boutelle's view, the omission is justified by two facts: the translator's original intention to provide a general picture of slavery along with the protection of the identity of the given protagonist, respectively (157).

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In this essay, I wish to compare Manzano's account to selected examples of North American slave narratives, especially that of Frederick Douglass, while exploring such related issues as the question of authorship, the description of slavery both in the Caribbean and the American South, the role of women in the institution of slavery, and the potential applicability of black stereotypes maintained in North American culture.

Textual and Comparative Analysis

The *Narrative* commemorates the experiences of Manzano, who was born into Cuban slavery as a son of a midwife, or *media criandera*, serving as a slave herself. The text describes his life in two parts, the first somewhat privileged stage (1797-1809), a period of tranquility, or a "childhood with plenitude" while serving Senora Marquesa de Justiz, and the turbulent phase of "real life" in the service of Senora Marquesa Prado de Amena culminating in his escape in 1837.

Being the son of a leading house servant and the favorite slave of the mistress, Manzano is treated by his *duena* with "greater kindness than he deserved" (56). Unlike his counterparts in the American South and known as a little creole, or "the child for his mistress' old age," his distinctive talents entitle him to education. Therefore, his target-oriented schooling tailored for slaves starts at age six, and by age ten, he learns to sew, mend curtains, "place the furniture in order," and recite sermons. Manzano's unique aptitudes make him eligible for special treatment. During this stage of his life, he was spared from physical or corporal punishment, and even his father was called to task for beating him as Dona Justiz "did not allow him for many days to come into her presence" (57). Furthermore, with the approval of the benevolent owner, he was taught catechism, "as much of religion as a woman could teach him" (57).

Moreover, according to the scheme of *coartación*, allowing a slave to purchase his freedom, both of his parents were partly emancipated by the benevolent Senora, establishing the price of their liberty at three hundred dollars. At age ten he was "placed under the care of his godfather," to learn the tailoring trade. After the death of Senora Justiz, he followed his godfather to Havana, where his treatment equaled that of a "white child" (59). Manzano characterizes this stage of his life with the self-descriptive term, *falderillo,* that is the lapdog of his mistress. Naturally, this is a liminal position as although virtually he was treated as Senora Justiz's child, he still suffered objectification. Karen Kornweibel asserts that despite Manzano's reference to his mistress as his mother, he was an object of amusement, his "mistress' toy" (67).

This relatively idyllic life or "childhood with plenitude" continued until age eighteen when Manzano became the slave of Marquesa Prado de Amena. The ensuing tribulations were both psychological and physical. Serving as the Marquesa's personal house slave, he was forced to sleep at the door of the mistress or eat at her feet. He was punished or chastised for the smallest infractions, including smashing a piece of geranium in his hands or falling asleep due to sleep deprivation after spending hours behind the chair of his mistress while she was playing cards. Whereas punishments were applied in a random, haphazard, and incessant manner, Manzano was able to preserve his physical and psychological integrity and gain freedom eventually.

Although most slave narratives were produced after escape to liberty, the writing of Manzano's text commenced during slavery, and the resulting subscriptions in the amount of eight hundred and fifty dollars amassed by the help of his sponsor enabled him to pay for his eventual release. Manzano attended *tertulias* or reading events, organized by Del Monte as a way of advertising his work and raising funds required for manumission. Boutelle asserts, however, that Del Monte was not an abolitionist, rather a reformist promoting gradual or indemnified manumission along with a struggle against government corruption. Manzano's *Narrative* is considered the only written report on slavery in Spanish America. Due to fears of its potential to promote abolitionism, efforts of publication were suppressed until 1937, when under the guidance of Jose Luciano Franco, the text was printed and released to the Cuban public. Having been translated by Richard Robert Madden, an Irish abolitionist, the *Narrative* was sold in Britain to promote anti-slavery aspirations.

The details of the publication process invite a parallel with that of *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845). While in case of the slave narrative produced in America, the voice of the slave was somewhat restricted by the white editor, as William Lloyd Garrison wrote the preface to Douglass' work, in Manzano's case, the parties were at an equal level. Garrison's condescending view of Douglass as one "capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being–needing nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race" implies his superior position to that of the black author. Furthermore, Garrison reiterates that Douglass wrote the *Narrative* according to the "best of his ability," and vouches for the originality of the text as it "is entirely his own production." Madden, known as a committed abolitionist, was anxious to testify to the originality of Manzano's text as he deposited the Spanish language original for inspection at the office of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

Boutelle considers Manzano's text a bricolated narrative due to the multiple perspectives it contains and highlights its "heterogeneous, multi-author mode representing slavery." Placing both Manzano and Madden on equal footing, he asserts that instead of the black authorship and white authentication pattern, the text is mutually authenticating. Bricolage refers to an anthologizing approach which compiles documents of various sources. The *Narrative* reflects a joint effort of Manzano and Boutelle in describing the details of Caribbean slavery to readers at both sides of the Atlantic while appealing to an international audience for the condemnation of the institution. (145). Naturally, since Madden functions both as a translator and co-author, the white amanuensis or editor's role is not applicable or in a limited way at best. In addition to the autobiography, the text contains poems both by Manzano and Madden. At the same time, the *Narrative* can be considered a creole testimony or a "collaborative construction of several different voices working together to create the performance of a single-narrating first-person voice understood to be the slave narrator" (144). Thus, while citing the best of Douglass' ability Garrison vouchsafes for the former, Madden uses the same term to qualify his effort almost in a self-effacing manner. He is eager to seek the approval of Spanish scholars to justify his eligibility as the translator of the text: "I determined, therefore, to give a short but faithful sketch of the Cuban slave-trade merchant and planter in verse, and the

presumption of the attempt is sufficiently obvious to myself to render any apology available in a literary point of view" (Madden iii).

Rejecting to treat the slave author as an unpolished black brother, Madden does not write a condescending preface. Just like Manzano, he opts for poems to describe the main aspects of slavery in Cuba. At the same time, while discussing the evils of Cuban slavery, including forced labor at the sugar cane plantations and the suffering brought on by "the nefarious and appalling traffic" (158), he provides an overview of slavery in Europe as well.

According to Eugene D. Genovese, unlike in the American South, Spanish slavery did not lead to the creation of a slave society, as the institution itself existed in "little pockets of masters and slaves within the larger society" (63). Slaves were utilized by officials, local leaders, hospitals, or even religious orders, among them the Society of Jesus (64). The classic large-scale slavery pattern was present in the sugar cane plantations, as the *peninsulares* or first-generation creoles were considered the prominent slaveholders.

Cuba was a central point of the slave and sugar trade and functioned as the gateway to the Gulf of Mexico. Although the Congress of Vienna in 1815 prohibited the importation of African slaves to Cuba as of 1820, Spanish authorities did not comply with the moratorium. All in all, in the Spanish colonies, slavery was on the periphery, and Cuba in the eighteenth century had the image of a "mild, patriarchal, slaveholding country" (Genovese 5). This image, however, was refuted by Allan Nevins, who, primarily referring to sugar slavery, considered Cuba "an outrage upon the name of Christian civilization" (qtd. in Genovese 66). Large scale slavery did not develop in Cuba until the British took Havana in 1762 during the Seven Years War (1756-1763). Furthermore, Cuban slaveholders supported the Union in the Civil War (1861-1865) in the hope of the defeat of Louisiana, a potential rival in the sugar export.

While Spanish or Caribbean slavery was believed to be less harsh than its North American counterpart, Manzano's report tends to refute this assumption. He was exposed to a series of punishments, which eventually motivated his escape. One of the biggest problems was that the punishments occurred at random, sometimes even the smallest infractions warranted brutal flogging, enforced starvation and being locked into a charcoal cellar for twenty-four hours without food or drink. Potential transgressions involved falling asleep on duty or allowing the lantern to run out of oil. The physical torture was further exacerbated by fear and intimidation. The captive Manzano was beset by images of ghosts and other nightmares: "I suffered from hunger and thirst, tormented with fear. . . . My head was filled with frightful fancies" (60). It is also worth noting that unlike in the case of the North American slave narratives, instead of the planter's wife, the potential source of relief or compassion could only be the spouse of the mistress. Manzano reports how the husband or brother-in-law displayed their sympathy by providing him with a bite or a drop of water. "On two occasions, the Senor Don Nicholas and his brother showed me compassion, introducing through an aperture in the door, a morsel of bread and some water, with the aid of a coffee-pot with a long spout" (61).

The infamous geranium episode presents a telling example of the physical and emotional anguish associated with slavery in the Hispanic world. After Senora Amena

smelled the fragrance of geranium on Manzano's hand as, during a walk in the garden, he inadvertently smashed a geranium petal, he was accused of stealing and suffered brutal retribution. He was "struck in the face" by his mistress before being turned over to the overseer and beaten with rods. The physical pain was exacerbated by psychological suffering as during his time in the stockade, Manzano was tormented by the fear of the "howling of a legion of ghosts" (67).

Manzano's punishment appears to have been most serious when he was accused of stealing either the geranium petal mentioned above or even a peseta or a capon. Although in Spanish slavery misappropriating the property of the slaveholder, in most instances, a sporadic individual act warranted heavy castigation, as the well-known tale "Malitis" suggests, in North American slavery stealing was a form of semi-organized resistance. The story commemorates how starving slaves obtained food and manipulated their owner into believing that one of his pigs died from "malitis," an imaginary disease, when in fact, the death of the animal was caused by a mallet blow to its head.

> In addition to Manzano's depiction, Madden contradicts the milder image of Cuban slavery as compared to its North American counterpart. Consequently, his reports on corrupt Spanish judges and the cruelty of the mayoral or the overseer promote the Black Legend as well. The Black Legend (*la Leyenda Negra*) included stories circulated by the British on the cruelty of the Spanish towards Indians and later Africans. The purpose of such tales was to reinforce the cultural inferiority of Hispanic peoples to that of the Anglo-Saxons. Madden emphasizes the unscrupulous aspects of the Spanish legal system with a reformist's zeal: How in the name of common sense is the law to be looked to, in a Spanish colony for the mitigation of the evils of slavery, or the protection of the slave? The excellence of the Spanish civil law is admitted by everyone, yet the iniquity of Spanish tribunals, the corruption of Spanish judges, and the incomparable villainy of Spanish lawyers is proverbial in all the colonies of Spain. Justice is bought and sold in Cuba with as scandalous publicity as the bozal slaves are bought and sold in the barracones. (162)

The negative images are somewhat alleviated by introducing the Cuban slaves' option to search for a new mistress or master if the latter proves to be too cruel or brutal (*buscaramo*). This type of protection, however, was not characteristic of the practices of North American slavery.

The writing process as a catalyst of subjectivation has a significant role both in Manzano's account and in reports about North American slavery. While in Houston Baker's words Olaudah Equiano, Douglass, and countless others wrote themselves into being on their initiative (31-32), Manzano produced the *Narrative* at a slave holder's request. Moreover, while Douglass received some help on the road towards literacy from the wife of the plantation owner, Manzano searched for the opportunity to copy the discarded pieces of his master's writing. When he was temporarily released from the service of Senora Amena to her nephew, Don Nicolás, Manzano's fate turned for the better. Although surrounded by the books of his temporary master

he gained possession of the former's texts by his photographic memory; he could not understand them. This setback drove him to commit to obtain literacy. He began to use the discarded documents of Don Nicolás as a writing primer and copied all the words. Although his master suggested that he should return to sewing and other domestic activities, he continued to practice writing by candlelight. Manzano's failure of comprehending the written texts of his master evokes a parallel with the well-known practice of the Talking Book during which the slave is confronted with the religious or cultural artifacts of the slaveholder, and his inability to make sense of the situation or the given text propels him on the road toward literacy. It is also noteworthy that Manzano's newly acquired ability not only resulted in the *Narrative* at hand but motivated further literary production in the form of poems included in the volume.

What kind of parallels can be discovered between Manzano acquiring literacy and other slaves encountering the phenomenon of the Talking Book? The first similarity is that just like James Albert Gronniosaw, Equiano, or John Jea, Manzano served Senora Amena and later Don Nicolás in a somewhat privileged position as a house slave. Likewise, the lack of the slave's ability to understand the texts used by the master, in most cases, the Bible, triggers the desire to learn. The fundamental difference is that Manzano encountered not religious or liturgical artifacts, but documents written for a secular, administrative purpose. The slave was forbidden to learn, or as demonstrated by the plight of Manzano, was at least discouraged from doing so. Moreover, Manzano's progress to literacy surpasses the stage of merely copying and reproduction of texts as he became able to bring forth new literary products by enriching the *Narrative* with his poems.

Although slaves serving in the house were considered to be in a relatively favored situation both in Cuba and the American South, in Manzano's case, the slave's masculinity was challenged as he was under the control of a woman. He was forced to sleep by her door or eat at her feet. Besides, Manzano was taught skills, such as sewing and dressmaking, primarily associated with women. While this ability plays a dominant role in two defining texts of American literature, Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative (1682) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), unlike his female counterparts Manzano received no payment for his services, and his tailoring prowess did not significantly improve his social mobility either. The series of humiliations endured as a *falderillo* or lapdog led to a fateful incident that began when Manzano's mother tried to intercede on her son's behalf to save him from a beating as a punishment for losing a lantern. The incident during which he was forced to witness the lashing of his mother incited a clash with the mayoral or overseer. This physical struggle, resulting in "the timidity of one as meek as a lamb, to become all at once like a raging lion" (65), brings Douglass' altercation with Mr. Covey to mind.

The description of Senora Amena's cruelty reminds one of Douglass's report about how slavery damaged the character of his mistress, with "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" (836). The role of the planter's wife in Maryland and that of the Senora of the hacienda in Cuba are also somewhat similar. Douglass' mistress began to teach him to read and write. However, she failed to continue the instruction process, and Douglass was left to his own resources. The slaves of the hacienda were also taught as Senora Justiz gathered the best and most capable children around

her when they reached the age of ten or eleven years and sent them to school, which happened to Manzano too. However, this type of education was limited to "instruction comformable to their new condition" (55), enabling creole children to fulfill the position of the house slave.

While slave narratives produced in North America emphasize the role of the male plantation owner as a principal agent in the peculiar institution, Manzano was subordinated to women who were more cruel and capricious than men. Demonstrated by Douglass being taught by the planter's mistress, women appeared to play a more decisive role in the lives of slaves in the South, while in Cuba, men tended to dull the edge of the oppressive system of slavery. As Henry Louis Gates argues, writing for black authors "was a mode of being, of self-creation with words" (qtd. in DeCosta-Willis 10), Manzano's narrative records the same process in the context of Cuban slavery. The question can be raised whether the black stereotypes circulated in North American culture can be applied in the Cuban context. The well-known distorted images included the "brute negro" threatening the white woman with rape, the "wretched freedman" and "natural slave" who proved the inability of blacks to function in the post-slavery world, the "comic negro" whose feigned laughter alleviated the fears of the slaveholder, and the "tragic mulatto" or the victim of miscegenation. Spanish images of blacks were similar to their propensity to fight, childish behavior, and being driven by animal instincts were highlighted in the discourse about them (Morillo 23). Baltasar Fra Molinero pointed to such characters as the *el bufón negro* or the jester. Furthermore, Carlos Alberto Montaner summed up Cuban white aristocracy's view of blacks as dirty, extremely joyful cowards, who at the same time were embittered, awkward, thieving, brawling, or lecherous (Morillo 28-33).

Manzano's description of his skills, his struggle for literacy and education along with his efforts to write poetry, and the subsequent need for special treatment invoke the "Noble Afric" image. Although the original concept implies the misadventures of the descendant of an African royal family, which James Albert Gronnio saw in North America, Manzano, despite his lower social standing, was predestined for such treatment by his social competences and education level. Moreover, Miriam-DeCosta Willis asserts that Manzano is the archetypal tragic mulatto, "the miscegenated victim of a slaveowning society" (9).

Conclusion

The Manzano *Narrative* displays several parallels with its North American counterparts, especially with the text of Douglass. Both reports highlight the brutality of slavery and its tendency to ruin the morals of the slaveholder. Manzano's text testifies to the more significant role of women in Hispanic slavery and the potential creation of a new self, that is, achieving identity or being launched on the subjectivation process is applicable here as well. Conativity, or the belief in the power of the written word to change reality, is equally discernible. Manzano, similarly to Douglass, refuses to consider himself as a slave after his confrontation with the *mayoral* or overseer: "I ceased to be a faithful slave; from a humble, submissive being,

I turned the most discontented of mankind: I wished to have wings to fly from that place and to go to Havana, and from that day my only thoughts were in planning how to escape and run away" (86). As far as the conditions of publication are concerned, in the case of Manzano's *Narrative,* the white author did not grant his approval for releasing the text but functioned as a co-writer or co-editor. Similarly to Frederick Douglass in North America, Juan Francisco Manzano became the best-known representative of the abolition movement in Cuba. While his writing was suppressed for almost a hundred years, its significance via the translation provided by Madden is unquestionable in the struggle to eliminate slavery not only in Cuba but in the Anglo-Saxon world as well.

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