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From Muse to Poet: Paratextual Practices of Women Poets in Cuba at the End of the Nineteenth-Century

Catharina Vallejo

This essay is dedicated to the tenth muse . . .

One of the foundations of Western thought is the structure of binary oppositions based in abstract conceptualizations. This process includes the expression of generic qualities as universalized notions. With respect to women, these qualities are generally contracted into “Woman.” Luce Irigaray describes this “Woman” as “having been misinterpreted, forgotten, variously frozen in show-cases, rolled up in metaphors, buried beneath carefully stylized figures, raised up in different realities . . .” (144). Women and writing have often been symbolic of each other as objects of the process of conceptualization. Aníbal González proposes that in many nineteenth-century texts the struggle for expression is represented as the attempt to submit a particularly rebellious or “hysterical” woman to the legality of an organizing discourse that “interprets” woman (137). Thus, women have always had to find a way to write within a cultural structure burdened by a long tradition of assumptions about gender (“women did not write”) and about authorship (“men, inspired by Muses, did it” [Jed 196]). Women’s role in poetic production was seen to be similar to that of her role in the home: as mediator and inspiration or muse. The millenary patriarchal patterns of subjectivity and gendering which imprisoned women in sensibility without legitimate desires, power, language, or participation in history made agency difficult. Be(com)ing a woman poet in the midst of the cultural, social, and artistic renovations taking place at the end of the nineteenth century was fraught with cultural, social, and artistic obstacles. In order to become writers, women had to cross several boundaries: that of gender (between “men” and “women”) and that of timeless abstraction (between “Woman” and “a woman”). In order to define herself as an author, a woman would in effect have to redefine the terms of her socialization. In the classical paradigm of the “double bind,” becoming an author meant denying one’s sex, becoming unsexed or a perversely sexed female (Gilbert and Gubar 49, 34).

In Cuba in particular, the bellicose and ultra-politicized environment of the late nineteenth-century made it even more difficult for women to participate in the intellectual activities legitimated by the establishment. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Cuba

suffered political upheavals that affected the economy, society, and culture of the island in profound ways. A strengthening of nationalism, which included factions of different political beliefs, wars for independence and the American protectorate that followed, urbanization, capitalization, and commercialism dominated a society which also and during that same time produced a large number of thinkers, educators, journalists, travellers, and poets. Women, however, had no part in war, politics, or nationalism. They did not travel and did not write professionally. They were not great property owners or merchants. In addition, the still prevailing romantic and *modernista* values tended to make women's public entry into creative writing difficult. Writing is a particularly forceful gesture because it is public and because it is a cultural practice already invested with a certain authority. Writing, after all, not only represents society's cultural values, but also confirms and creates them. In addition, it has the potential to incite and provoke more writing (Singer 145), re-authorizing already disseminated concepts and/or launching new ones. Those women that did write in the contradictory conditions that prevailed at the end of the nineteenth century would be caught between, or as part of, both the mythical and the carnal, the absence of time and the full present. Yet women in Cuba wrote, published what they wrote, and encouraged and recognized each other as poets. This paper explores some of the practices used by several women in Cuba at the end of the nineteenth century in their effort to move away from being an abstracted artistic inspiration and move towards becoming a writerly agent. By establishing mutual recognition, influence, and support for a new, historicized status for women poets in a modernizing era, they validated themselves and each other as *poetas* in their own historical context.¹

The binary characteristics and the process of abstraction had inevitably led to ambiguities and contradictions. Rubén Darío, the self-proclaimed foremost writer of *modernismo*, admitted the existence of *poetisas*—with its implication of femaleness, generically and therefore qualitatively distinct from *poetas*—but denied the natural, organic (i.e., legitimate) existence of a-woman-as-poet, on the same level as a man. This would be, he said, like there being blue roses or white blackbirds: “Jamás una mujer, desde Erina hasta D[omi]na Emilia Pardo Bazán ha llegado a esa inmensa altura esencialmente masculina que se llama el Genio . . . la mujer poetisa, o mejor poeta, esa rosa azul, ese mirlo blanco . . .” (*Figaro*, April 29, 1894). Darío's negative specification (not even one woman) excludes all women from the “height of genius” which is “essentially masculine” and associated with (or necessary for) the existence of the *poeta*. However, Darío immediately admits the Puerto Rican poet Lola Rodríguez de Tió (who was living in Cuba at the time and a recognized poet there) to the list of *poetas*, although he describes her as “Cristiana, amante de la patria, suave, sensitiva; mujer, muy mujer” (*Figaro*, April 29, 1894). Thus Darío's concept of the “blue rose” reflects the conflictive status of women poets at the height of the modernizing processes taking place at the end of the nineteenth century, and especially in *modernismo* which, as Sylvia Molloy writes, sees women exclusively as subject matter; it focuses on her as the passive recipient of its multiple desires, as a commodity that is alternately (or simultaneously) worshipped in the spirit and coveted in the flesh (109).

Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century women were (still) abstracted into symbolized female figures which in their positive (worshipped) aspect included the “goddess,” the “Angel of the house,” “Mother nature,” and the “mother country” (*la madre patria*). All of these could be seen as inspirations or mediators for artistic creation and, as such, could be considered as

aspects of “the muse.” Since their divine origin in classical Greek mythology (Hesiod established nine and named them in the eighth century BC), the muses have been strictly and exclusively a female phenomenon. “Muse” has always been “Woman.” She is defined by her abstraction as a female and her beauty, the latter the very objective of poetry itself. Elizabeth Harvey indicates that many poets recognize the poetic voice as originating from a female source in a creative process closely related to female reproduction. The traditional Muse is part of the eroticization of the female; as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, the muse implies a quasi-sexual excitation, a discharge by the poet of creative sacred energy (7). The poet invokes the muse, which serves as a superior force and inspiration towards a power to create. To a certain extent, this discharge represents an irrational and passionate force that connects the poet with the creative power that resides in the universe. Muses are therefore passive, at best an inspirational value; they themselves are not creators. On the contrary, they are the “other” external to the creative process (Allen and Young 1); that is, “Woman” “stands as the silent but enabling condition of writing” (Harvey 78-79).² However, this process is not unidirectional. The “muse” can be said to constitute precisely the dialectic between “woman” and “poet”; responding to “the Muse” by writing verse establishes the individual as a recognizable cultural entity. Although the muse does not create poetry, one could therefore in effect say that the Muse creates “the poet.” However, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, the sexual implications of the Muse are not applicable to the female poet; she “cannot ‘beget’ art upon the (female) body of the muse” (49). In women poets, the passionate, quasi-sexual quality of the traditional muse, symbolic and mythical, is lost in favour of the collegial aspect of support and recognition in actual reality. It is, however, of course precisely this supportive aspect that creates (i.e., legitimates) the women as *poetas* in their own historical context. Adrienne Rich stated that “woman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power . . .” (657).

It is evident that the end of the nineteenth century was a profoundly ambiguous era, contradictory in several dimensions. With the co-existence of Romanticism, positivism and modernism—to name but three of the conceptual perspectives that were current—profound changes occurred in all social, political, and cultural endeavours. Cartesian rationality was being challenged; the traditional dominance of “spirit” (male) over “flesh” (female) was in question. New conceptions of the world—time, space, subject, voice—carried concomitant renovation in the representation of this world. “Woman” stopped having the ideal and feminine abstraction of “Muse”; the latter was being materialized in, or personified by real, concrete, historical women.³ Many poets of the late nineteenth century recognized this historization process taking place in modernization. Rubén Darío’s well-known poem “Balada en honor de las musas de carne y hueso” (*Poesía erótica* 212) postulates the physical love of a woman as “la mejor musa.” In an 1875 poem that makes woman a carnal being but maintains the symbolic character of “country,” the exiled José Martí put “country” before “woman” by making it clear that, however difficult the decision, a man must put the love of his country before the love of a woman: “Podrá encender tu beso mi mejilla / pero lejos de aquí mi alma me espera . . .” (XVII: 112). The schism between flesh and spirit, and the late nineteenth-century man’s struggle to choose between them, is evident here. And in her poem “Mater creatoris,” upon reflecting on how nature is indifferent to the devastation wrought by the war in Cuba, Mercedes Matamoros, while granting its creative powers, denies “nature” its maternal qualities: “Oh gran naturaleza, la eterna creadora, / no eres madre del hombre porque no tienes alma” (*Poesías* 259). As Martí destabilizes the traditional

symbolic association between woman and country, so Mercedes Matamoros also proposes a conflictive relationship between the symbolic content of “mother earth” and its referent lodged in reality. Thus, through the secularizing trends of the end of the nineteenth century, and under the influence of bourgeois scientism and materialism, the symbolic values traditionally ascribed to a number of concepts would disappear, including the representation of the female in a series of arch-traditional concepts. As the sacrality was lost from the “Muse,” the symbolic “Mother” was removed from “Nature” and “Country,” and these terms were emptied of their traditional values as abstract, supernatural, and powerful in the slow modernization process that converted “Woman” to “a woman.”

A distinctive trait of modernity is the consciousness of the individual’s meaningful insertion into his or her contemporary history; as Octavio Paz affirms, there was “[una] voluntad de participación en una plenitud histórica” (21). And an integral part of this modernizing process, as Susana Montero Sánchez states, is the “adjudicación a sujetos femeninos históricos” of the traits of “muse”, that is, her desacralization and entry into the historical process (3). Where responding to the Muse as a divine, abstract entity is akin to a self-legitimation exercise, naming a real woman as muse, especially if this woman is also a poet, amounts to legitimation not only of the poet-writer, but also of the woman named as muse. Thus, for women the first step to becoming a modern woman poet—not necessarily chronologically, but certainly conceptually—would have to be the historization of the concept “Woman,” allowing for particular real “women” to act as writerly agents in subject positions. Historicizing the abstraction represented by the “Muse” was a major step in this process.

In some cases women poets are still inspired by a traditional muse of Classic origin, anonymous and abstract. For example, Aurelia Castillo’s “Nuevos lauros” explicitly refers to Greece and “las bellas Musas en riente coro . . .” (*Escritos* V: 143). Mercedes Matamoros shows a transition from abstraction to potential materiality in “A mi musa” (1902), where the muse starts as a “visión deslumbradora” crowned with stars and flowers, but is then also the only being that accompanies her always, a soul twin to her own: “Y tú sola tal vez vendrás mañana / a verter en mi pobre sepultura / las lágrimas piadosas de una hermana” (*Poesías* 125). Nieves Xenes is explicit in naming other living historical women poets as “muse” in several compositions. The 1901 poem entitled (and thus dedicated to, in recognition of) “Luisa Pérez de Zambrana” names and evokes the other poet as muse: “Ella es la musa a cuya voz celeste / fascinadas las almas se doblagan / cuando engarza en el oro de sus versos / cual fúlgidos diamantes sus ideas” (58). She defines Pérez de Zambrana, constituting her as “present” by the statement “ella es,” and the text launches the other poet into the larger sphere of superior artistic qualities beyond the strictly and exclusively feminine. In another poem, dedicated “En el álbum de Mercedes Matamoros,” Xenes again specifies Matamoros as muse and refers to the latter’s poetry: “Un album. Canta Musa, y no reprimas / tus notas de recóndita tristeza” (145-147; also published in *El Figaro*, January 1897). In this poem, moreover, as Matamoros had done with the traditional muse, Xenes considers Matamoros as a like soul to herself, different in quality from other people: “. . . ahora no vas a desgajar tus ruinas / a los pies de una estúpida belleza. / . . . / la bella que esta vez oirá tu canto / tiene un alma que piensa, siente y ama / . . .” They are the same and have suffered similar experiences: “que en mis horas radiantes y serenas / la ventura soñé que tú has soñado, / y en el cáliz amargo de mis penas / hay gotas de hiel que has

apurado!” Several months later, in May of that year, Matamoros responds with her own poem dedicated to Xenos entitled “Primavera” (*Poesías* 78-79). Although the poem does not mention Xenos again, it is very *modernista* in style and repeats some of the same lexicon (“Cual límpido zafiro brilla el cielo, / cantan las ramas en la selva hojosa, / y busca miel con amoroso anhelo / el zunzún en el cáliz de la rosa . . .”), reconfirming their collegial spirit within the same artistic vision.

For women then, the modernizing spirit of the new era meant the struggle for the secularization/desacralization/historization of the concept of “Woman,” with the aim of “women” becoming particular individuals and active members of modernized society. Thus, the process of historization at end of the nineteenth century represented a fundamental change for women. They lost the qualities long ascribed to them as “natural”: their supposed sensitivity, passivity, fragility, and their poetic, abstract, inspirational beauty and mediation. The discursive practices linked to the “muse” by Cuban women poets of that time invoke other women poets—alive, contemporary, professional colleagues. These act as sources of inspiration and mutual support for each other in a dialogic process that founds writing and sets it into its particular circumstances, the historical “here” and “now” of modern times. This process also reflects the fact that women’s relationships in general maintained the sharing quality in their writerly environment, contrary to the growing individualism of the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, these practices validate and legitimize the writing in the context of the constitution of the nation, its identity, and its intellectual history of creative innovation.⁴ In an era whose epistemological bases strove to exclude the female from the creative processes, the historization of “Woman” was a necessary part of the process that would allow women to be *poetas* in their own time and place.

Faced with the impossibility of appealing to the traditional muse, women poets who wished to express their inspirational recognition, seek protection, and validate their status as *poetas* had to articulate their own equivalent practices. Aníbal González indicates that both writing and women appear in nineteenth-century texts as sources of an original and rebellious vitality, contradicting their supposed passivity (137). As Sylvia Molloy suggests, the woman writer, more than the male, needs to ritualize her trace through literature, for example by means of epigraphs and signatures (110). Gérard Genette has called these and other features of textual production—including also the prologue and the dedication—paratexts. These constitute marginal discursive spaces in which the limits of legitimate writerly processes are debated; that is, their very marginality, as Yuri Lotman has proposed, allows them an especially fruitful potential for effecting change (134).⁵ These practices also configure a dialectic movement between a work and its public, where the creative (linguistic, poetic) and receptive (social, cultural) codes interpenetrate, between the epistemological bases of poetic creation and creation itself, in an in-between space that is neither internal nor external to the text—or both at the same time. By referring to the reality which exists outside the poetry, these practices establish a “horizon of expectations” for the reader. Genette considers that the elements of the paratext make the text “present”—i.e., they create its existence (1). The fact that they are subordinate to the text is also important since they thus make the text stand out as such. The paratexts are the entryways to the text, their threshold, which to a certain extent dictate the text’s reading; the paratexts frame the text and offer the reader an opportunity to reflect on the workings of poetic creation. Intertextuality, while not a

paratext, functions in a similar manner. It is an internal discourse that refers to an internal discourse of another text outside of itself. As does the dedication, it establishes a link, a communication between two poets, validating them as such and producing *poetas*.

The end of the nineteenth century was a time of growing professionalization when poets were able to make a living with their writing, usually for magazines and/or newspapers. Most poets of the era, in fact, were correspondents or journalists for daily papers or artistic periodicals. Men intellectuals (poets and other writers) frequently commented on women poets' work, but inevitably these comments carry the marks of patriarchy. They tend to be paternalistic when positive, and sometimes strongly critical when negative. In both cases, their discourse is clearly gendered and often directed at the person-as-woman, that is to say, *ad feminem*, such as Darío's comment on Lola Rodríguez de Tió. Thus, Julián del Casal refers to Juana Borrero as "la niña" whose soul "parece un botón de rosa amortajado en un crespón . . ." (*Poesía* 270). In his 1891 journalistic *crónica* entitled "Aurelia Castillo de González" (and dedicated, ironically, "Al doctor Gonzalo Aróstegui"), Casal again emphasizes the descriptive qualities of the person of Aurelia Castillo, likening her to "una estatua de jaspe rosado, coronado de nieve . . . [con] cierta dulzura femenina y cierta melancolía secreta . . ." (*Crónicas* 230). When Manuel Márquez Sterling, editor of the prestigious literary periodical in Havana *El Figaro* writes about women poets, he does not flatter and is often direct in his criticism. His article dedicated to the poet Luisa Pérez de Zambrana, while in general positive, also mentions her sentimentality as a negative aspect, as well as her defects which "el crítico escrupuloso y equitativo pudiera señalarle" (*Figaro*, May 1901). And a final example comes from José Martí, who in a brief poem published in 1882 and dedicated "A Mercedes Matamoros, en un abanico" describes her as a "doncella garbosa / en cuyos ojos anidan / blandas miradas de tórtola . . ." (XVII: 186). The validity of the criticism, the sincerity of the praise, or the relevance of the personal comments are of little importance; the reception of the works on the part of the reading public would have been influenced (not to say compromised) by the expressed assumptions. These comments, moreover, published in a foremost journal in Havana (and including those of a renowned poet such as Darío), could well have intimidated those women attempting to write and publish.

Dedications, common practice in previous ages when they petitioned the protection and/or remuneration of a *mecenas* (protection being one of the Muses' roles), also acquired new meanings for writers of the end of the nineteenth century. Women were still not generally included in the group of professional writers or journalists (Aurelia Castillo being among the first in the Spanish Caribbean, commissioned by Havana newspapers to travel to the 1893 Chicago and 1889 Paris World Exhibitions and send back reports to be published) and were still living dependent on the generosity of benefactors or on family fortunes.⁶ The format of the dedication between women poets ("A mi amiga . . .," for example) is reminiscent of letters, a genre from the "private sphere" allowed to women from early times, but which in the context of poetry published in periodicals also made the close link between the two poets part of the larger public community. The poet dedicated is the addressee of the composition and is also the reader privileged by the text. Lola Rodríguez de Tió dedicates "Invernal" this way: "A mi ilustre amiga Aurelia Castillo de González" (II: 44-45). The dedication was often explicit by the designation "poet," legitimizing both the writer and the addressee, establishing a professional relationship beyond the rhetorical one. The dedication was a

recognition of the symbolic debt the poet had towards the dedicated poet as source of inspiration (“muse”) and the protection offered by the shared professionalism. In addition, of course, the dedication also had as addressee the reading public, which is called upon to be a witness of the recognition of the professional relationship (Genette 134-36), thus constituting the dedication as symbolic capital.

There were generally two forms of dedication. The writer could name (i.e., identify) the dedicated poet in the title of the poem, which then usually described or praised her, or there was an explicit dedication aside from the title of the poem, which was then seen as a gift to the dedicated poet. In both cases, the dedicated poet is “made present” (i.e., “real”) by the poem. Thus, the “Melodías hebreas de Byron,” a series of poems translated and reworked by Mercedes Matamoros around 1880 and published in her *Poesías completas* in 1892, are dedicated to “*la Sra Aurelia Castillo de González. Inspirada poetisa, mi amiga y eminente hermana en letras; homenaje de admiración y afecto de Mercedes*” (65). And in 1906, Luisa Pérez de Zambrana dedicates her poem “Ya duermes!” with the subtitle “En la muerte de la ilustre poetisa Mercedes Matamoros” (373). These dedications specify the links that existed between the poets as sentimental (“affection,” “admiration”) and personal (“friend”), but also as the personal made professional (“sister in letters”), and fully professional (“inspired poet,” “illustrious poet”). With their mention of “inspired” as a reflection of the original poet-creating Muse and of the term *poetisa*, the dedications constitute both women as the subject of the act of poetry-writing.

The custom of prologues written by women to the works of other women has deep roots in Cuban culture. It is frequently characterized by two aspects. For the woman writing the prologue, it is an opportunity to reflect on what poetry, and being a poet, is. In addition, it is also frequently an opportunity to write a critical-biographical study of the poet for whose work the prologue is being written. In Cuba, Domitila García was the paradigm of female literary criticism when she published one of the first anthologies of women’s writing. Entitled *Album poético y fotográfico de escritoras y poetisas cubanas, escrito en 1868 para la señora doña Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda*, it included a biographic-historical contextualization of the anthologized compositions. Being dedicated to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, already a recognized poet at the time, would have legitimated those included in the volume as worthy of her recognition. The fact that this volume was republished several times until 1914, and that García updated it for every new version, is testimony of its popularity and prestige—a status that constituted support and national recognition for the women that appeared in it.

Gérard Genette indicates that a prologue is generally written by “a writer whose reputation is more firmly established than the author’s” and, therefore, in its address to the reader, “the mere presence of this type of preface is in itself a recommendation” (268). Perhaps the originator of the prologue by a Cuban woman poet to the work of another (and who confirms Genette’s statement) was Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda herself with her 1860 prologue to the second edition of Luisa Pérez de Zambrana’s *Poesías*. In this prologue, she not only presents a discussion of Pérez de Zambrana’s work, but also proposes a female poetics in which she immediately eliminates the diminutive *poetisa*, incorporating women poets into *los poetas*. Luisa Pérez is “un poeta cubano, que es además mujer” (Pérez de Zambrana 433). It is clear that Gómez de Avellaneda here puts being a poet first, nationality second, and then turns being female into an advantage. It is also worth noting that she is one

of the few artists—male or female—who dares call women poets *poetas*. She recognizes Pérez de Zambrana's quality as muse and as Cuban, when the island was still, of course, a colony: "La sencilla pero seria musa de nuestra hermosa y querida compatriota . . ." (Pérez de Zambrana 435). As do other paratexts, prologues thus predispose the reader towards certain particular readings; by means of the praise of the work by an "authority" (as Gómez de Avellaneda was at the time), suggestions are made by the female author to the reader with respect to his/her expectations: how and what to find in the text.

Around the turn of the century in Cuba, the practice of prologuizing women's work was taken up especially by Aurelia Castillo de González, one of the most respected (women) writers and a writer of the most varied textual production. This included poetry, reviews, prologues, opinion pieces, articles on women's issues, travel, and literary criticism, frequently on contemporary Cuban poets whom she personally knew. In her extensive prologue to the *Poesías completas* by Mercedes Matamoros published in 1892, Castillo begins with a summary of Matamoros' life, "tarea por extremo fácil" (vii). She exalts Matamoros' stature by stating that she herself is in fact being honored by having been asked to write the prologue: "ha querido hacerme el honor de que asocie mi nombre a uno tan ilustre, dándome al propio tiempo participación en su hermosa obra" (vii). She recognizes that the prologue, being a rational-critical discourse by one writer about another, serves to insert both into the literary tradition of their times. After the easy biographical part, Castillo now has to examine Matamoros' compositions and "decir lo que de ellas pienso," which is a more "arduous" task (vii). She explicitly mentions that the volume serves to reverse Matamoros' disappearance from the memory of the Cuban people. On the one hand, the public (the Cuban nation) is being accused of causing this neglect: "Mercedes fue olvidada. Cuba pecó" (iii). It is also clear, on the other hand, that the homage implied by the publication inspired Matamoros, who had stopped writing, "a fecundar de nuevo" (xxi)—an obvious reference to the productive inspirations of the muse. The book has wrought "una verdadera resurrección" (xxi), allowing Cuba "a redimir su culpa" (iii). Castillo's comments direct the reader to consider the work being presented as complex, of high quality, and worthy of serious thought and conservation. It thus contributes to the legitimation of the literary object, as well as its creator, at a national level.

The most interesting discursive practice between women poets is the use of intertextuality, which through a textual dialectic between two (or more) poets legitimizes their status as such and materializes (historicizes) the inspirational process. Alberto Julián Pérez considers that intertextuality allows for an integration of cultural models, as well as a critique of the poets' own environment (155-156). There was a certain amount of intertextual correspondence between poets of both sexes; the implied commentary of the intertextual procedure constituted part of the poets' involvement in the formation of their cultural environment.⁷ In the Cuban women poets, the intertextuality at times also achieves the quality of an explicit dialogue. Lola Rodríguez de Tió dedicates her poem "Sperans" (published in *El Figaro* in December 1894) to the young Juana Borrero, recognizing the latter's status as muse: "Ven, oh Musa gentil! y placentera / arrójate en mis brazos fraternales; / y al eco de mi voz, huyan los males / que annublaron tu sol de primavera!" (III: 266). Borrero responds with a poem significantly titled "Vínculo" (80), explicitly establishing the links between the two poets. It is evident that each of these poets is encouraged and supported by the other. As Noe Jitrik states: "en la medida en que se la asume [la intertextualidad] hay una intención de

ascenso a un campo de circulación de bienes poéticos sin aduanas, puesto que la intertextualidad *es* precisamente el campo de circulación libre” (91). This intertextuality, in allowing for the free circulation between two poets, also and again sets these poets apart from the “other,” from the general public and other poets, into a special exclusive group. Borrero’s poem contains some of the same words and phrases as Rodríguez de Tió’s: “Escuchando tu acento cariñoso / mi corazón sensible se entenece / y la vida más grata me parece / y el porvenir más amplio y luminoso / . . . / Déjame que me arroje entre tus brazos / uniéndote a mi ser con unos lazos / que no pueda romper sino la muerte!” (80).

Aurelia Castillo, again, was adept at inserting words or phrases of other poets into her own text. She does this with Gómez de Avellaneda and Plácido, for example, but also with Casal, referring to one of the latter’s poems in her “A ‘la Maja’ de Casal,” (*Escritos* V: 70).⁸ In 1892, Castillo responds to a poem by Mercedes Matamoros entitled “A Aurelia” in the form of direct dialogue:

“A Aurelia”
por Mercedes Matamoros

Cuentan que en el valle un día
dulce y cándida azucena
de orgullo y contento llena,
bajo el sol resplandecía.
--)Habrà otra, entre sí decía,
tan blanca y pura cual yo? --
Y de envidia se murió
lamentando su locura,
porque otra más blanca y pura
en Aurelia se encontró.

“A Mercedes Matamoros”
por Aurelia Castillo

Cuentan que en el valle un día
cierta alondra se quejaba
porque una nota ensayaba
y emitirla no podía.
--)Habrà otra, entre sí decía,
más desgraciada que yo?--
Y el lamento que exhaló
fue de acordes tan divinos
que apagó todos los trinos
y por reina allí quedó.⁹

It is worth noting that these poems are themselves both intertextual by being a parody of a text in Act I of Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño*.¹⁰ The linkage between recognized poets as an exclusive group acting at a high cultural level thus becomes ever stronger. It is also evident that, in spite of the obvious ludic appearance, the intended topic of the women’s poems is poetic creation itself, each of the poets expressing her admiration for, and recognition of, the other’s talent. With her references to the “notas” that the “alondra” tries to sing, which turn into “acordes tan divinos,” Castillo also quite clearly implies that her contemporary colleague Matamoros has the qualities of a “muse.” As was the case with Lola Rodríguez de Tió and Juana Borrero, the intertextuality of these poems extends from the subject matter to the rhymes and lexicon, reinforcing the creative and intellectual ties that were binding the group of writers into *poetas cubanas*.

From the foregoing study of Cuban women poets’ paratextual practices, it can be seen that at the end of the nineteenth century, Latin-American women’s writing was beginning to resist the statism and reification of the concept “Woman” and the discourse prescribed to her by tradition. As part of the modernizing process, women were resisting men’s institutionalized mediation in order to gain direct access to knowledge and experience.¹¹ They struggled to find a voice that would give them recognition as historical subjects, as part

of an unstable, changing world in which they wanted a meaningful role and concrete expressions of particular experiences. In this manner, the women writers made of their marginalization “una fuente insuperable de energía creativa,” as Evelyn Picón Garfield states (10). They instituted procedures to affirm their own voices, their own identity—to be the acting subject of history and discourse, and not be subject to history or be the object of discourse. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was an urgent necessity for an “unmasking” of the [long-standing] symbolic contract, as Iris Zavala expresses the status of women (189). Women poets began to respond, giving voice to those who had not been allowed to speak and to what had remained unexpressed. Ultimately, therefore, these practices of support, protection, recognition, and inspiration legitimize the establishment of these (women) poets as such: women who exercised the profession of creative writing, subjects of their writerly powers. In addition, the paratextual strategies confirm these women as a group legitimately participating in public intellectual activity at the national level in the Cuba of the end of the nineteenth century.

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Notes

- ¹ Dania García Ronda claims there were 100 published poets in Cuba in the nineteenth century (288); at least twenty-five of these were published around the turn of the century. My research centers on late nineteenth-century Cuba, but the implications of its results should be applicable to other areas in Latin America.
- ² Thus, many women were accepted as competent and published translators, mediating the conjunction between both foreign contemporary cultures (French, German, Italian), and also the traditional classic literatures (Latin and Greek).
- ³ One thinks of Rubén Darío's wife Stella, for example, and in Mexico both Rosario de la Peña ("la de Acuña," as José Martí states [XVII: 168]) and Graziella Garbalosa (author of the first erotic novel written by a woman in Cuba) served as "muse" to a circle of writers, including José Martí himself (see Montero Sánchez).
- ⁴ Cuban women poets were ideologically involved in the struggles for political change in the island. Notably, Laura de Zayas Bazán, in one of her "Siluetas femeninas" published in *El Figaro*, mentions that the "muse" of Aurelia Castillo de González, who was exiled from Cuba by the Spanish governor for her subversive writing, would only "awake" upon her return in 1898 (*Figaro*, April 1907).
- ⁵ "On the periphery [. . .] the relationship between semiotic practice and the norms imposed on it becomes ever more strained This is the area of semiotic dynamism . . ." Lotman relates this phenomenon particularly to the European avant-garde, which "started life as a 'rebellious fringe'" (134).
- ⁶ For example, Mercedes Matamoros was left destitute after the mental illness and death of her father. In 1892, the newspaper community of Havana financed the publication of her *Poesías completas* so that she would be able to live from the subscriptions to the sale of the volume. I note that the title of this work is extremely ironic, as Matamoros produced another two hundred plus compositions after 1892 (see Matamoros *Poesías completas*).
- ⁷ At the end of 1893, for example, in three successive issues, the periodical *La Habana Elegante* published three sonnets entitled "Las horas" by Casal, Lola Rodríguez de Tió, and Alfredo Zayas, the latter two dedicating their compositions to and responding to Casal's "Qué tristes son las horas!" Casal likens the hours to a somber flock of sheep on the way to eternity; Rodríguez de Tió considers the hours *alegres*, like a flock of doves through the blue sky, and Zayas *iguales*, like the eternal passing waves of a river.
- ⁸ In this composition, Castillo showcases her rhetorical capacity, using the same last word of every line in her own composition. This poem is also interesting because Castillo appropriates the masculine poetic voice: "Si fuese rey . . .", and she addresses the *maja* directly. This is in contrast to Casal, who maintained a psychological distance, writing a physical description of the *maja* dancing.
- ⁹ Quoted in Castillo de González (*Escritos V*: 300, 78). Note that Matamoros was known as "la alondra ciega" (see Muñoz Bustamante).
- ¹⁰ "Cuentan de un sabio que un día / tan pobre y mísero estaba / que sólo se sustentaba / de unas hierbas que cogía. / Habrá otro (entre sí decía) / más pobre y triste que yo? / Y cuando el rostro volvió / halló la respuesta, viendo / que iba otro sabio, cogiendo / las hojas que él arrojó" (I.ii). I am grateful to Jesús David Curbelo of Ediciones Unión in Havana for pointing out the relationship between the Calderón and the Cuban texts.

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- ¹¹ There was, in fact, a tradition for women poets to depend on male mentors to “rid” their compositions of signs of their deficient education (Kirkpatrick 70).

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