

Performing Poetry, Race, and the Caribbean: Eusebia Cosme and Luis Palés Matos

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In *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*, Charles Carnegie asserts that “Western modernity has excelled in the production of discrete, stable, manageable categories” (65). These categories, such as race and nation, are social phenomena that, like Judith Butler’s notion of gender, must be continually reproduced, or performed, to be maintained. Carnegie, a social scientist, argues that the need to impose order in academic disciplines has led to privileging the national at the expense of mobile or drifting, transnational cultural flows. Adverse to ambiguity, he finds that his colleagues have often been unable to convey “the significance of lives that transect the borders and boundaries of place and race” (70). Arjun Appadurai extends Carnegie’s thinking when he proposes that “cultural differences are no longer taxonomic but interactive and refractive” (60). He says: “Culture is less a ‘habitus’” (Pierre Bourdieu’s term which refers to a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and “more an arena for conscious choice, justification, representation”—the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences (44). Both of these writers offer more interactive models of cultural identity that seem particularly apt to this moment, when “transnational” and “global” are buzz words, but their undoing of rigid concepts also allows us to see the past in a new light, to recognize people and practices that have slipped between or moved among more strictly defined categories.

The Caribbean offers particular challenges to many concepts of category, as it encompasses diverse languages, cultures, ethnic and racial identities, within and across various nations. The issue of categorization is compounded by the facts of migration and transnational drift, both historical and present day. The Caribbean is a permanent example of continual transformation, for it is composed of hybrid sites that are “neither one nor the other, but something else besides, which contests the territory of both” (28). Homi Bhaba’s definition of “interspace” resonates with Fernando Ortiz’s early twentieth-century definition of transculturation, and both characterizations draw attention to the fact that theories can construct regional identities as much as describe them. Paulla Ebron has developed this perception relative to Africa and, in her book, *Performing Africa*, she proposes that regional identity is the result of performance: “we have learned to imagine regions through repetitive tropes,” she states (10). Transcult-

uration and hybridity, *mulatez* and *mestizaje*, cultural and racial mixing, constitute the Caribbean. Combining these ideas with an analysis of the work of early twentieth-century artists, Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos and Cuban performance artist Eusebia Cosme, the discussion that follows will offer some specific examples of how elements of race, region, nation, and gender are performed in their work and of what effect performance has on the genre of poetry. We will find that both of these artists problematize race through poetic performances, unsettling some polarized extremes and reinforcing others. Neither can escape the representational regime of racial difference, yet both call attention to its boundaries and question conventional roles for poetry in the process. We will see how established concepts about poetry—style and content, audience, and circulation in the early twentieth-century Americas—represent part of the dominant culture that they both undermine.

Palés Matos is the better known of these two figures: born in 1898 (the year when Puerto Rico became a colony of the U.S.), Palés began his career writing poetry in modernist, baroque or *costumbrismo criollo* styles (Castro de Moux 59). 1921 marked a change in Palés's style, for he rejected his earlier individualist perspective and became an engaged writer. This transformation in his attitude led to his *poesía afroantillana*, or *poesía negra*, in which his work began to express the colonial situation and global subjection of the black race (Castro de Moux 121). His name was often associated with that of Nicolás Guillén in the Spanish American tradition for their shared *negrismo*; Palés, however, is a white poet who identified with the black heritage in the Caribbean as part of a defiant response to Western culture (Castro de Moux 119). At the time, his shift in styles was received by literary establishment with antagonism. Today his earlier poetry is often forgotten, and he is read only for his *negrismo*, which still generates polarized opinions. Josaphat Kubayanda, for example, criticizes Palés for his failure to connect with his *negrista* poetry: there is “no adequate emotional bond [. . .] forged between the poetic voice and the poetic object” and this creates a damaging distance, rather than proximity, to those significantly different from the majority (23–24). Magali Roy-Féquiere views Palés as an outsider who speaks *of* Afro-Caribbean culture rather than speaking *for* it, as a member of the group might, and this is one source of the ambiguity she finds in his work (238). Arcadio Díaz Quiñones also observes ambiguity, but he urges reconsideration of the historical circumstances of *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (the first collection to feature Palés's *negrista* poetry, published in 1937), and he reads it as an expression of the author's colonial status, as opening a dialogue with his cultural context in the '20s and '30s (when many of these poems first appeared in other venues). Developing this line of thought, Aníbal González notes that *Tuntún* “has rarely been read as a book,” and González's subsequent reading of it as such demonstrates that “it is a carefully structured text which aims to make a coherent statement about Caribbean culture” (287). González shows how Palés's concept of *mulatez* endorses a utopian vision of Pan-Caribbean unity in step with his Latin American contemporaries' search for national identity (González mentions Vasconcelos and Martínez Estrada, among others; 286, 290). The contradictions evident in Palés's *negrismo* and in the critical reactions to this may be inherent to telling a story of cultural difference, to a “politics of belonging-in-difference,” as Stuart

Hall might put it (Scott 13). Centering the discussion about Palés around concepts of cultural blackness indirectly calls into question the construction of whiteness, and reminds us how the construction of identities may be “interactive and refractive” (Appadurai 60). Luis Palés Matos finds himself in his Other, communicates his own concerns through a black voice, yet his *negrista* poems contain cultural elements that are not completely under the poet’s control.

Some of these elements become more apparent when Eusebia Cosme, a mulata, performs Palés’s work. She brings his language to life, for it is embodied by the Cuban’s dramatic recitation, and her performances of his work suggest that both the form and content of the poetry may change depending on who is speaking and who is listening. The dramatic declamation of poetry was common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Cosme worked and some ideas about what the practice was meant to generate can be found in various *manuales de declamación*. A turn-of-the-century Chilean describes its goals as: “producir en el alma de sus oyentes las mismas impresiones de que se supone poseído el personaje que representa lo que sintió el poeta” (Urzua Rosas 62). When there are substantive differences between the poetic speaker and the writer, or between writer and the person who embodies his or her words, the performer must bridge these gaps. In a manual published at mid-century, an Argentine describes some of the differences between *declamación* and recitation, noting that the former is closer to the theater arts: “Se aproxima a la danza, al canto, a la misma representación teatral” (Jijena Sánchez 9). The addition of physical presence, gesture, facial, and vocal expression adds interpretative layers to a poet’s work. The performance of a poem is one of a variety of possibilities for transmitting poetry outside of books or texts; it can represent another more public “reading” or appropriation of a poet’s work, for meaning changes as a poem is presented by different artists. Not an analytical mode of poetry reading, declamation tends to heighten emotion, augmented by vocal inflection and bodily expression. In her analysis of Eusebia Cosme’s performances, Emily Maguire suggests that the linguistic aspects are secondary to physical ones and Maguire describes her show (only accessible to today’s readers through written commentary) as a “carefully crafted, well-rounded performance [. . .] in which Cosme herself had a surprising amount of directorial agency” (4).¹ Cosme orchestrated her presentations, which drew on works from a range of writers influenced by the African diaspora and combined written works with elements from dramatic and oral traditions, creating hybrid performances that joined European and African griot or storytelling traditions. In a 1948 newspaper report, Cosme stated that the emotion of her race cannot be understood merely through reading, but requires an interpreter to “recreate” the written work, “similar to the musician who feels the force of a great theme throughout his consciousness” (“Disease Eusebia . . .”). Indeed, she sees her role as essential to the reception of the poetry she presents.

In sound recordings of Cosme’s declamation, the pitch of her voice moves

¹ I am grateful to Emily Maguire for sharing her unpublished essay with me; it is forthcoming in a collection from the University of Binghamton Press entitled *Enlaces: Africa in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

from high and emotive to low, rocking, and rhythmic—from wails to murmurs. Her intonation is always markedly dramatic and expressive as she creates different voices and regularly slides into song. The heightened emotion in her work may seem dated or over-the-top, but it may also be viewed as part of an affective performance of her national and racial difference. In his article, “Feeling Brown,” which discusses contemporary performances of Latino identities, José Muñoz connects ethnicity and affect and suggests that: “we move beyond notions of ethnicity as fixed (something that people are) and instead understand it as performative (what people do)” (70). Muñoz argues that there is a normative or official “national affect” that is aligned with a hegemonic class and that minority groups perform affect against this normative subjectivity (white middle-class in the case of the US; in Cuba in the 1930s, it would be an upper-middle class *criollo* identity), and “navigate the world on a different emotional register” (68, 70). In Cosme’s case, as we will see in the discussion that follows, audiences may have connected with her performances of sentiment at multiple levels leading them to apprehend the meaning of the poems she performed in different ways.

Born in 1911 in Santiago, Cosme was an early interpreter of Afro-Antillean verse; she was an influence on later, well-recognized performers whose recordings still circulate, such as fellow Cuban, Luis Carbonell. She performed the works of Nicolás Guillén, Félix Caignet, Emilio Ballagas, and Palés Matos (among others) in the 1930s, while traveling throughout the Caribbean, South America, Europe and the US. She settled in New York City in the 1940s, where she had a radio show in which she read dramatically and recited poetry on CBS’s “Las cadenas de las Américas.” She later appeared in several Mexican films and plays, often in a stereotyped servant or maternal role.² Upon examining some of the reviews of her work with poetry, it is clear that she embodied Afro-Cuban identity for most of her audience. Federico de Onís called her: “Cuba hecha carne, voz, gesto, ritmo.”³ Spaniard Juan Ramón Jiménez said of her: “es una empinada ola negra, especie de Josefinitia Baker de la declamación desgarrada [. . .] la rosa canela cultivada” (quoted in Sarabia). Luis Palés Matos described her as the: “verbo auténtico y único de la poesía antillana [. . .] que arranca de lo más entrañable y angustioso de su raza.”⁴ Cosme makes the Afro-Antillean visible to outsiders, giving form to the exotic, but she also creates this identity for Cubans (and when performing the work of Palés, for Puerto Ricans). In a long introduction to Cosme, Federico de Onís notes how many aspects of Afro-Cuban life were denied in the ’20s and ’30s; he says these aspects were “made Indian” (*hecho indio*) in Cuban culture.⁵ Aside from her radio broadcasts, Cosme received much recognition, recited poetry in Carnegie Hall and included traditionally black institutions like Howard University in her US tours; her work was met with ac-

² Ironically, perhaps, it is easier to gain access to her films than to recordings of her poetry recitals, while it is her work as a *declamadora* that earned her fame.

³ Handwritten note, dated December 21, 1939, New York. The Eusebia Cosme Papers, The Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁴ “Juicios sobre Eusebia Cosme.” Program for Cosme’s 17th recital. No date. Cosme Papers.

⁵ Federico de Onís. “La poesía mulata: presentación de Eusebia Cosme, la recitadora.” El Liceum, la Habana, 23 julio, 1934. Cosme Papers.

claim in these venues, although she recited her poetry in Spanish and audiences often understood the meaning of her performances through voice and gesture rather than language. Among her papers is an announcement for “A Cuban Evening” in New York, presenting Cosme and Langston Hughes as the main attractions, with songs by Eartha Kitt and poems by Nicolás Guillén.⁶ Guillén, in fact, called her a “puente lírico, la genuina portadora de un mensaje difícil a causa de su misma sencillez” (quoted in Sarabia). A message that was difficult not so much for its poetic style as for its distance, perhaps, from dominant society.

Unlike other *declamadoras* of the times (such as Argentine Berta Singerman or Cuban Dalia Iñiguez), Cosme chose to focus her performances on Afro-Antillean verse. Because of its folk origins and its dependence on sound—its use of the *jitanjáfora* (words, often neologisms, used not for meaning but for sonoral or onomatopoeic qualities) and its valuation of the “indecible”—this style of poetry leant itself to declamation and performance.⁷ But, as Roberto González Echevarría has demonstrated in his perceptive rereading of Guillén’s “Sóngoro cosongo,” this poetry does not *only* depend on sound; it frequently includes multilinguistic and transcultural meanings that cultural outsiders may not understand. In these aspects Cosme’s performances are vocalizing cultural differences. Guillén himself may have wanted to play down this aspect of his poetry because in recordings of him presenting his own poems, he reads in a clear and formal style that does not draw attention to the sonority of his work. Eusebia Cosme had other goals. Margot Arce made these remarks about what Cosme did with her performance of “Falsa canción de baquiné,” a poem published by Palés Matos in 1929:

Eusebia, compenetrada del espíritu del poema y dominando otra vez las dificultades del ritmo, crea un canto originalísimo y maravilloso, especie de “spiritual” por su acento ritual, en donde se mezclan todas esas paradojas de superstición, dolor, dinamismo e ironía que hacen el alma negra. A Eusebia Cosme, la gran artista, debemos la revelación completa de este poema de Palés; también le debemos una más honda y aguda comprensión de la poesía afroantillana.⁸

Hers is a performance of cultural difference, and her embodiment of the poem offers a range of interpretative possibilities: viewers may see her work as the representation of lived experience, or a performance of “authenticity,” as a marginal example of folklore, or an exaggerated performance of otherness.

“Falsa canción de baquiné” on the page and in performance offers an intriguing example of cultural difference. The poem is described in a program for one of Cosme’s performances in New York as simply: “The false song of the baby’s wake”: In this poem the poet presents the idea of an African “baquine”

⁶ “Katherine Dunham Stages a Cuban Evening.” Wednesday, May 29 (no year). Cosme Papers.

⁷ The term “unsayable” comes from Federico de Onís’s “La poesía mulata . . .,” Cosme Papers.

⁸ Margot Arce. *El Mundo*, San Juan PR, 1939. Cosme Papers.

or the wake of a baby.”⁹ Traditionally a “baquiné” is a transcultural ceremony combining Spanish and Kikongo wake traditions (according to Onís and Moreno Vega). Some definitions note that it celebrates the death of child, who becomes an angel; however Federico de Onís’s transcription of a baquiné sung in Guayama (Palés’s birthplace) clearly expresses mourning and places the blame for the baby’s death on the lack of a doctor (or socio-economic circumstances). But the words of Palés’s poem contradict all of these traditions (hence the title: “Falsa canción . . .”), for he sings of a child who has died because of Babilongo, the *brujo*, and who after death becomes a warrior serving Ogún Badagrí, Yoruba god of war, “in whose honor white flesh is devoured in order to obtain the power of the oppressor’s race” (my translation, Castro de Moux 89–90). What the program doesn’t tell us is that Cosme is performing a story of revenge and rebellion:

Papá Ogún, quiere mi niño,
Ser un guerrero como tú;
Dale gracia, dale cariño. . . .
Papá Ogún ¡ay! Papá Ogún.

Ahora comamos carne blanca
Con la licencia de su mercé.
Ahora comamos carne blanca. . . (86)

Colonialism and slavery are violent cultural intersections that in turn produce violent responses. Cosme, an Afro-Caribbean woman, is performing a poem that turns a mourning ritual into the threatened overthrow of dominant, colonial society. In a Calibanesque move, she and Palés use the language of their oppressors (colonial and white), not to mourn, but to menace. She enacts the words of Palés and embellishes them through her theatrical representation.

Since there are no existing video records of Cosme’s performances, we only have access to this aspect of her work through commentaries on it, programs, notes, still photographs, drawings, and a few sound recordings (that do not circulate much beyond special collections).¹⁰ Listening to her rendition of “Falsa canción de baquiné,” is striking for the drama she injects into the poem. She begins her performance singing the opening summons which addresses the child using a mixture of Spanish and African languages:

¡Ohé, nené!
¡Ohé, nené!
Adombe gangá mondé,
Adombé.
Candombe del baquiné,
Candombe. (84)

⁹ “Eusebia Cosme: Only New York Recital of Afro-Antillean Poems.” Program. Feb. 7, 1939. Cosme Papers.

¹⁰ In dealing with colonial performance and the problem of understanding theatrical moments to which we only have indirect access, Diana Taylor has noted that descriptions of these performances may reveal “not just what we know, but the complexities of how we know it,” an observation I find equally pertinent to Cosme’s case (356).

In the following stanza she alternates observing the “sleeping” child in a dramatic whisper that creates an air of suspense and confidentiality with the sung words “ju-jú,” and when she arrives at “Babilongo ha sido,” the 7th line of this section, she repeats it and skips the last two lines of the textual version, emphasizing the orisha’s eerie role here. Cosme then breaks into a more dramatic narrative inflection to briefly recount the passage of the baby out of this world, under the watchful eye of “Bombo el gran mingo,” framing this section within the sung “coquí, cocó, cucú, cacá” verses of Palés’s text that anticipate the heavily accentuated repetition of “Papa Ogún” that follows. Papa Ogún’s name appears ten times in this slightly condensed version of the poem, and each time Cosme makes it an emotive exclamation, louder than the surrounding words, her voice falling emphatically on the final syllable. The last repetition, before “comemos carne blanca” (cited in the lines above), includes a sly chuckle and the volume of her voice increases as she arrives at the poem’s conclusion, which is a repetition of the opening invocation. Cosme’s performance does not alter the meaning of Palés text, but inflects it and calls attention to magical, rebellious elements already there, through both her edits and vocal elements of her performance. Imagining her performances of his poetry also draws our attention to the complex reception of poetry presented in different venues and remind us of how it may be interpreted differently, depending on audiences’ range of relationships to the languages and cultures involved.

Taking place in the ’20s and ’30s, Cosme’s performances and Palés’s move to an Afro-Antillean style correspond to the Harlem Renaissance, and while some of Cosme’s international audience was Spanish-speaking, and some of it part of a Pan-African diaspora, another part of her audience was surely participating in the white vogue for Africa. In *The Dialect of Modernism*, Michael North examines white writers of the time who use cross-racial linguistic identification to rebel and escape social norms (9). He finds that the white Americans’ or Europeans’ imitation of African-American dialects created a racial masquerade that offered them freedom (11, 33). It is significant that rather than a visual marker of race, these writers chose a linguistic disguise. Both Cosme and Palés perform Afro-Antillean identity through poetry. In this they too move from visual distinction to sound and language as modes of racial differentiation.

But do these artists find freedom in their otherness? Not the freedom of the white Europeans and North Americans, of course, but different kinds of independence. Palés embraced what was certainly a marginal identity in 1930s Puerto Rico for political reasons. He wrote what he characterized, not in racial terms, as Antillean poetry to reflect a collective reality. He says:

I posit that the Antilles—Cuba, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico—have developed a homogeneous spiritual type and are therefore psychologically tuned in one common direction. And I further sustain that this spiritual homogeneity is absolutely different from the common masses of Hispanic Peoples and that in [our homogeneity] the *negroide* factor intermixed in the Antillean psyche has served as a separator, or in chemical terms, as a precipitative element. (qtd. in Marzán 512–13)

Arcadio Díaz Quiñones notes that Palés's goal was radical: he sought to write "una poesía que no sólo aspira a la revisión del lenguaje sino trata de subvertir una literatura y unos valores" (103). Palés wrote against the myth of the *jíbaro* (or his Puerto Rican countryman of Spanish descent) to provoke the defenders of Hispanicity in the Antilles (114). His work is an example of "interculturalization," Jahan Ramazani's term for the postcolonial hybridization of Western literary and non-Western oral traditions (18). It is also indicative of his double-consciousness as an early twentieth-century Puerto Rican, at once Western and modern, yet negotiating his own and his region's "unsteady location inside and outside of conventions" (Paul Gilroy's characterization of members of the Black Atlantic 73).

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, discussing the Anglophone Caribbean, offers us another angle from which to approach Palés's use of dialect, which he terms "nation language." Rooted in African oral traditions, it is the result of specific cultural experiences, and "is like a howl, or a shout or a machine gun or the wind or a wave. It is also like the blues" (Brathwaite 311). Sound or noise is an element in the creation of meaning. It is not "bad English," and its purpose is to rally national spirit and break from standardization (qtd. in Bernstein 114–19). Vera Kutzinski affirms this idea when she describes the turn to Afro-Cuban culture in the period as a "political vehicle for national integrity and survival" (142). Rather than read what has been called dialect poetry as transcribed speech, Charles Bernstein has suggested that we might use it to observe the distance between the written and the oral, to make note of how authors and performers play with this gap (117). Against the move to categorize his Antillean poetry in terms of cultural and racial differences, Palés uses literature to explore fissures between the oral and written, black and white, making these terms "interactive and refractive" (returning to Appadurai's phrase), rather than static.

These ruptures are heightened in its performance. Speaking of oral poetry, Paul Zumthor has proposed that: "at the heart of a society saturated with writing, oral poetry [. . .] tends—because it is oral—to escape the law and to submit only to the most flexible formulas" (188). When Eusebia Cosme performs "Falsa canción de baquiné" she is reinventing Palés's work and reinventing herself, staging her Antillean identity in contrast to other races, cultures, and ethnicities. Her work is also an example of "orature," Ngugi wa Thiong'o's term for interactive forms that are "produced alongside or within mediated literacies" and go beyond the oral-written opposition. These oral and written "modes of communication have produced each other interactively over time" and play a powerful role in maintaining collective memory (Roach 11–12). An example of this interaction: the Puerto Rican poet's writing was clearly inspired by the songs of the *baquiné* he attended as a child accompanied by his family's cook, Lupe (Onís 15); Cosme's performance of it returns it to both the feminine and the oral realms.¹¹ Joseph Roach uses Ngugi's concept of orature in his study of performance in circum-Atlantic cultural exchange, *Cities of the Dead*, to analyze how

¹¹ Maguire argues that Cosme also "created a speaking black female subject whose vocal presence visibly contested the objectification this same female figure receives in much *negrista* and Afro-Antillean poetry" (5).

speech, images, and gestures may supplement or contest the authority of “documents” (11). Roach finds that performance can create “counter-memories” that call attention to the “disparities between history as discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by bodies that bear its consequences” (26). When Cosme performs Palés’s *baquiné* she is publicly enacting a phantasmatic rebellion enclosed in a mortuary ritual. In doing so she gives voice to otherness, recalling the pain of slavery and the colonial experience to those members of her audience who grasp the language, and implicitly questioning the authority of the colonizer who will not understand the real significance of her ceremonial response (but respond only to the English précis and the range of emotions she engages). When Cosme performs Palés she becomes a metonymical representative of her race and gender, and of her triumph (both personal and representative).¹²

Cosme participated in the production of her image as mulata through the poems she presented and insisted on black and mulatto identity in their thematic and formal elements. Her repertoire included works from locally known poets such as Cubans Teófilo Radillo, Félix Caignet, Rafael Esténger, and Arturo Clavijo Tisseur, as well as many poems by those prominently associated with Afro-Caribbean literature, such as Guillén or Palés. In her selection Cosme effects a kind of sampling, joining a variety of poetic voices linked by theme and by the person presenting them. Some of Guillén’s poems that appear repeatedly in her programs are: “Balada de mis dos abuelos,” “José Ramón Cantaliso,” “Secuestro de la mujer de Antonio,” “Simón Caraballo,” “Pregón,” “Sensmayá,” and “Balada del Guije.” All of these impart the history of African presence in Cuba; several evoke syncretic Afro-Cuban religious experiences, many express suffering and/or dramatic death due to social inequality and poverty, and others include rebellion. “Jose Ramón Cantaliso,” for example, features a figure not unlike Cosme herself as she performs “Falsa canción del baquiné.” Cantaliso is an entertainer who sings songs that chronicle suffering and rebellion to tourists and comrades—stirring reaction in one group, while entertaining the others, who do not comprehend his message. Of Palés’s oeuvre she regularly included “Falsa canción . . . ;” “Majestad negra,” a sensual celebration of the mulata; “Lamento,” another *baquiné*; “Bombo,” a sonorous depiction of an African scene; and “Ñam-ñam,” a stereotypical portrayal of African cannibalism. Her repertoire ran the thematic gamut: from poems that celebrated African heritage and chronicled both suffering and survival to those that reinforced the most clichéd fears about Africans. Palés’s “Intermedios del hombre blanco,” a series of poems from

¹² Analyzing musical forms of the African diaspora Paul Gilroy observes that performers must “ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories [. . .] to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable fact of their survival” (qtd. in Roach 286). Part of this reconstruction may be seen in the circulation of Afro-Antillean poetry in contemporary art forms. The Bronx-born Puerto Rican musician Willie Colón, for example, has a 1977 recording entitled *El baquiné de angelitos negros* which reworks the idea of the *baquiné* and the white-black, oral-written dialogue and maintains this ritual in a popular cultural context. It is based on the poem “Píntame angelitos negros” by Venezuelan Andrés Eloy Blanco, which criticizes the absence of black people in representations of heaven; Cosme often closed her performances with this poem.

Tuntún, are included in some performances, and they are a curious choice for Cosme. In these texts Palés shifts perspective to that of a white male observer who uses a more distanced tone with less striking rhythm to portray tropical venues. In a poem from this series such as “Tambores,” African presence is observed by the white Other who is warned:

Ten cuidado hombre blanco, que a ti llegan
 Para clavarte su agujón de música
 Tápate las orejas
 Cierra toda apertura de tu alma
 Y el instinto dispón a la defensa;
 Que si en la torva noche de Nigricia
 Te picara un tambor de danza o guerra,
 Su terrible ponzoña
 Correrá para siempre por tus venas. (99)

The irony of the admonition and of the work in the context of the other poems in Palés’s book is heightened when one imagines these words embodied by Cosme. Giving voice to the white man may be one way she claims her Other, defamiliarizes the dominant white male subject and, in so doing, brings her difference and her audience’s possible fear of this to the forefront.

The fact that Cosme’s and Palés’s artistic production occupies disparate positions relative to power and discourse is not just due to race, gender, or nationality, however. Another factor is the endurance of the Puerto Rican’s written texts or books versus the ephemeral existence of Cosme’s work—those concerned with her work must use photos, archives, programs, letters, reviews, and other records of responses to her performances to reconstruct what isn’t there. Since her performances took place before ready reproduction, we need to search out different ways to account for or imagine that to which we do not have access. This means that there are inherent limitations on the claims we might make; yet this situation may also lead to a more balanced critical perspective, for we must examine the reception of her work as much as its production, and we must speculate about how performance alters relationships between poetry and its readers—transformed to *público*. It also tells us something about other audiences for poetry, about its circulation and consequences beyond the intelligentsia, the “official voices” of the literary establishment.

There is a range of interpretations of what a performance may mean: not just entertainment, an audience can be at the same event and take quite different things from it. We have already seen how Cosme’s presence and style of *declamación* might affirm her own and others’ African roots, might reinforce stereotypes, might permit a rebellious cross-racial identity. Adding another ingredient to the mix, her work may also operate as a concrete cultural performance; that is, it may participate in the performative in a particularly Afro-Cuban way. In African-derived Santería, song is an element of ritual, a way to open communication with the divine realm, and lyric poetry has long been associated with song. When the poems Cosme presents include names of and references to a saint or oricha, her speech may “do things with words” (recalling J.L. Austin’s characterization of

perlocutionary speech acts). To a believer, invoking a deity's name may be like public prayer, meeting an obligation, or "cumpliendo una promesa," by honoring the oricha and his or her powers.¹³ Taking into account the possibilities of poetry as ritual speech reminds us that some members of Cosme's audiences may have experienced certain poems in terms of their sacred dimensions. While her performances were public, what she did could still be experienced in very personal ways. Paying attention to how performance remakes the poetic experience, builds community, affirms or alters identity, and communicates in multiple registers simultaneously, leads to a more nuanced understanding of how Cosme created intercultural performances of multiple identities.

While Cosme started her career in Cuba, began to travel in the Caribbean, and in her early international profession represented Cuba, she moved out of the Afro-Cuban national framework when she settled in the US. One can see this change in the works she chose to include in her radio show, for in the 1940s she incorporated translations of works of African American poets such as Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, demonstrating that the framework for her presentations was not solely national or regional, but racial. We might read this internationalization as an affirmation of her racial rather than her regional identity and of her ability to speak for a larger group, or it may have been a way for her to step back from her role as "iconic mulata" (Kutzinski's term for the symbol that contained myriad questions about race, gender, and sexual power relations in Cuba, 7). As each of her roles did, becoming a representative of the broader African diaspora involved some compromise. There is evidence of this in the text of "Morenito mío," a translation of one of Dunbar's poems included in one of the undated transcripts of a radio broadcast from the 1940s.¹⁴ The first few lines of the poem are translated like this:

Morenito mío de brillante ojos,
acércate a papá, sube a sus rodillas.
¿Qué cosas hacías? ¿Tortillas de lodo?
Mira este babero. Qué sucio. Díos mío.

Dunbar's original poem reads:

Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee.
What you been doin', suh – makin' san' pies?
Look at dat bib – you's ez du'ty ez me. (134)

"Little Brown Baby" is a good example of the dialect poetry for which Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1901) is well known. The poet's use of Afro-American vernac-

¹³ At the end of her intriguing study of Santería in Santiago de Cuba (not incidentally, Cosme's birthplace), Kristina Wirtz speculates that Desi Arnaz's famous rendition of "Babalú" has been seen by some Cuban believers as his open communication with the divine, thanking him for his success. (200)

¹⁴ There is no source or translator noted here, but other transcripts refer to the book *Negro Poets and their Poems*, compiled by Robert T. Kerlin, and the translator for other such poems in the transcripts is Enrique Portes. Cosme Papers.

ular speech allows us to “hear” race in the English language version, and it also creates boundaries, signaling the difference between members of the group and outsiders. Cosme and her translator do not choose to reproduce Dunbar’s use of dialect, even though clear antecedents existed in Spanish, for Guillén’s *Motivos del son* was already published (1930) and Cosme had been performing works which used popular Cuban vernacular speech for some time. The translator may not have been able to more closely approximate what Dunbar wrote, or, perhaps Cosme and her translator were not willing to enter into the linguistic and ideological controversy that Guillén’s work had activated. Or it may be that, rather than reinforce boundaries, Cosme wanted to embrace a broader group of listeners, and was therefore not interested in alienating part of her audience which may have comprised members of a “nascent African-American middle class” and “wealthy white patrons” of the Harlem Renaissance (Kutzinski 152). We can speculate, but what is clear is that the conflicts between the desire for recognition, voice, publication, and audience and the realities of survival in a predominantly white cultural world is a transnational experience evidenced in different ways by Dunbar, Guillén, and Cosme.

“People who are in any way significantly different from the majority,” Stuart Hall has explained, are “frequently exposed to binary forms of representations, polarized extremes” that can only provisionally be unsettled (229). Yet, when analyzing race and Black Atlantic cultures, Paul Gilroy proclaims that they are “unashamedly hybrid” and that they continually confound any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity (99). In effect, according to Gilroy, these minority cultures are always unsettled. Which is it? As we have seen, it is some of both, and what meaning is produced depends as much on who is listening as who is writing, who is speaking, and what is said. Palés’s poetry and Cosme’s performance of it raise rather than resolve questions about identity—racial, gendered, spiritual, national, regional—and about poetry. Rather than declaiming poetry to reinforce national identity (as was common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the example of Eusebia Cosme’s performances, like her life, exemplifies multidirectional cultural exchange in the Americas. The conjunction of these two artists makes us confront and renovate our assumptions about poetry and the shifting boundaries and overlaps among high and popular cultures, oral performances and written literatures, as it suggests possible ways to renegotiate and reconsider dominant and subordinate positions within broader concepts of literature, culture, and nation.

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