

The Stone and its Images: The Poetry of Nancy Morejón

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Roads are like dreams, their invitation to journey filled with the lusty air of freedom, but also with wonderfully strange and sometimes dark auguries. A crossroads both centers outdoor space in a system of coordinates and yet opens upon to vastness, the universe. A kind of expansive optimism overpowers one as it did Walt Whitman (1950, 118): “Afoot and lighthearted I take to the open road,/Healthy, free, the world before me,/The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.” But roads have a long history, secrets, hidden paths: “You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here,/I believe that much unseen is also here.” (Whitman, 119) In Cuba, roads and crossroads must begin with Afro-Cuban “orisha” ‘deity’ Elegguá. Elegguá is the beginning. Not the beginning of creation, but the point of departure of an imaginative faith that is one of the main sources of Cuban culture and history.

Nancy Morejón’s poem “Los ojos de Elegguá” (“The Eyes of Elegguá”) is a rich re-working of Cuban transcultural identity.¹ The author recalls seeing the eyes of Elegguá at night time. Like all the santería orishas, Morejón recalls it dancing: “bursting out in shrieks/elegguá leaps/imagines songs/grazes space with a copper dagger.” Elegguá is the orisha of destiny and crossroads, and so it is the orisha invoked before all others, because it is the messenger for all of the gods. Elegguá is also vitally linked to the unexpected, twists of fate, and death. In part this is due to his “pattakí” ‘story.’ One day he

found a coconut giving off a blinding light in the road. It came from the three eyes of a “obi” ‘coconut.’ He picked it up and took it home to his mother and father. But the eyes didn’t shine (in another version of the tale, the eyes kept shining behind the door, but it was forgotten). He threw the coconut behind a door. Three days later he died. Soon disaster hit the kingdom and finally they looked for the obi behind the door and it was empty and crawling with bugs. In its place they put an “otá” ‘sacred stone,’ which is the origin of Elegguá and that is why it is said that “The dead one gave birth to the saint.” Morejón is evoking this pattakí with the eyes for a reason: she is hoping to enlist his all-seeing capabilities. Because of this, Elegguá is known as the personification of justice, and by knowing what is best for humankind, he symbolizes perfect balance in nature. But the poem has an Elegguá who might be needing the powers of Olofi to keep his orientation. This is not so strange since Olofi is the personification of the Creator and his forces. According to one of the pattakís, it was Olofi who created the orishas by projecting his “aché” ‘power, energy’ into the “otanes” ‘stones.’ Still, there is a moment if not of doubt, at least of precaution: the last stanza begins “If Elegguá’s eyes were to return/they would come crossing the vigorous river/ where the gods drew off in the distance, where there used to be fish . . .” Morejón’s poem seems to be caught between belief and the power of aché: is it the eyes of Elegguá that give her faith, or is it the faith that makes her see Elegguá’s eyes? Possibly, a little of both, because to see things along the dark road of life, there’s nothing better than to have Elegguá’s eyes lighting the way, as if you were being protected by the orisha’s headlights.

Though Morejón makes no overt references to Catholic saints Elegguá’s Christian counterpart is St. Anthony of Padua. The orisha is also linked to St. Martin of Porres and El Niño de Atocha. An orisha has many “caminos” ‘roads’ or avatars, sometimes twenty, thirty or more. St. Anthony, was noted for performing miracles and was a charismatic preacher. It is said he even delivered a sermon to fish, who listened in rapt attention. He is often represented with the Child Jesus in his arms, which explains his association with Elegguá, often presented as mischievous and playful, like a child. St. Martin

of Porres is perhaps more consistent with Cuban culture. St. Martin is the saint of racial harmony and social justice, since he was so committed to helping the poor, and particularly slaves. He was a mulatto who had been rejected by his white father.

El Niño de Atocha goes back to when Spain was still occupied by the Moors, who were holding many Christian prisoners in what the Spaniards call the War of Reconquest. In the town of Atocha a child was sent in with food (bread and water) for a few prisoners, and yet was able to feed hundreds. According to legend, it was Christ himself who had appeared in the form of a child, in order to provide material and spiritual nourishment to the prisoners.

It's also possible to read certain historical references being made here, although they are indirect. Elegguá's colors are red and black, which are also the colors of the July 26th Movement led by Fidel Castro. Elegguá is a warrior and is considered the first in a trio of holy warriors that also includes Ogún and Ochosi. Again, Cuba since 1959 has often espoused a self-definition of itself as a guerrilla society, traits that include warrior values like courage, determination, skill, and strength. Furthermore, the Niño de Atocha's day is January 1st, the New Year, which is also the date of the triumph of the Cuban revolution (1959). Should we stretch things further by pointing out that one of Cuba's "sacred warriors of independence," Antonio Maceo (June 14) was named for St. Anthony (June 13)? Che Guevara, born on the same date as Maceo, might be considered one of the "sacred warriors of the Cuban Revolution." Whether Morejón had these allusions in mind or not when she wrote the poem is not the point. What is significant is how her poetry draws on different traditions, histories, literatures and images to fashion a uniquely Cuban work. They are part of the many "camino's" 'roads, avatars' that feed her work, evoking Whitman's "the world before me," the "much unseen" and "the long brown road before me leading wherever I choose."

In a brief poem to Elegguá, Morejón has brought together a true example of Cuban transculturation: a Yoruba orisha, symbol of destiny, chance, and justice, merges with the power of faith and miracles (St. Anthony), racial harmony and social

justice (St. Martin of Porres) and the total nourishment of El Niño de Atocha. Time, *mestizaje*, social justice, fate, faith, and utopian fulfillment (through faith and revolution) come together in the vigorous imagery of this powerful poem.

In a poem dedicated to Nieves Fresneda, an extraordinarily gifted dancer in the Cuban folkloric tradition, who died in 1981, the author builds on the images of another orisha, Yemayá. With consummate skill, Morejón brings together history and myth, invoking the powers of fertility and the imagination. Yemayá is one of the principle orishas, goddess of the ocean, fertility and life that Fresneda often danced in her performances:

Elegy for Nieves Fresneda

Like a flying fish: Nieves Fresneda.

Sea waves, galley slaves
blue algae petals
cloak her days and hours
reborn at her feet.

A murmur of Benin
brought her to the womb of this land.

There are
her snakes,
her circles,
her shells,
her petticoats,
her feet,
seeking out the thicket
blazing unknown paths
toward Olokún.
Her ocean feet
finally,
tree trunks of salt,
perpetual flickering feet,
hoisted like moons for Yemayá.

And in space,
 later,
 over the sea foam
 Nieves
 whirling over the sea,
 Nieves
 deep in immemorial
 song of dream
 Nieves
 in Cuban seas
 Nieves.

(*Morejón*, 1985, Trans. Weaver, West)

Morejón begins with a concrete image of Nieves that both unites her to her Yemayá but still retains her individuality. The first verse begins with “like a flying fish,” and seems to be inspired by Mendive’s floating santería-based figures. This not only refers to her dancing ability but already brings her into the realm of Yemayá, for in Yoruba *Yeyeoma eja* means “the Mother whose children are the fish.” The verse ends with her whole name, as if to underline her uniqueness as a human being.

After establishing a mythic but individual presence, Morejón immediately gives historical weight to the first images. With sea waves she mentions galley slaves and then “A murmur of Benin” that brings her to the depths of Cuba. The beauty of the Yoruba cosmology is grafted onto the deep pain of historical reality: slavery. The author will make one more historical reference in the poem when she says “buscando la manigua” ‘seeking out the thicket.’ Manigua is a Taíno (indigenous) word referring to a place with dense vegetation, consisting of shrubs, bushes, lianas; a kind of natural profusion of confusion. Curiously, it also refers to the celebration of illegal card games, dice and other forms of gambling. Taking advantage of both profusion and confusion, many slaves escaped into the manigua, to begin a new life (gambling with freedom?), from the oppressive eyes of their masters. In the XIX century, the expression “coger la manigua” ‘take to the manigua,’ meant to take up arms against Spain, join the revolution for independence.

Morejón deftly builds a transition from the manigua that goes to Olokún with the verse “blazing unknown paths.” It looks back at the manigua and goes towards the depths of the ocean, where Olokún, one of the major orishas is to be found. Olokún is a mysterious and powerful orisha. Her energy can be destructive, which is why it is said that Obatalá had her tied to the bottom of the ocean. Olokún’s image is presented as a woman (or siren) with arms outstretched, one holding a snake, the other a mask. She is also visualized as a hermaphrodite. Olokún is the frightening mix of the origin (the ocean floor, and of Yemayá), the generative principle, and the awesome power of wrath and destructiveness. All the orishas, and particularly Yemayá must make sure she’s treated with utmost respect.

The final part of the poem focusses on Nieves attaining an almost mythic presence or substance, dancing over the water. The water imagery is central to Morejón’s poetics, and this poem in particular draws on the many resonances of water, as we’ve seen. The Atlantic passage, fertility and the source of life which is part of the Afro-Cuban (santería) tradition, derived from Western and Yoruba beliefs. Undoubtedly other images come to mind: purity, the waters of the feminine and of reverie (Bachelard). Feminist critics point out that water is synonymous with women’s eroticism, as it is concerned with a blurring of rigid boundaries of hierarchy and gender, just as water runs over, flooding distinctions with a kind of plenitude (Ostriker, 1986). Water’s mysterious depth and infinity, its movement, its enveloping “warmth” and strangeness, bring it close to a dream state. Morejón’s poem conjures up these forces. Fresneda dancing over the waves both maintains the flow of water (since she is dancing Yemayá’s steps), as well as the lightness of air. More importantly both air and water convey the sense of movement, which is a key ingredient of the imagination. Here are Bachelard’s own words: “We always think of the imagination as the faculty that *forms* images. On the contrary, it *deforms* what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them. If there is no change, or unexpected fusion of images, there is no imagination; there is no imaginative act. If the image that is present does not make us think of one that is

absent, if an image does not determine an abundance—an explosion—of unusual images, then there is no imagination” (Bachelard, 1). This creates both a mobility of images and, to borrow a well-known phrase, an “invitation to the voyage,” or as Bachelard says (1988, 3): “Perceiving and imagining are as antithetical as presence and absence. To imagine is to absent oneself, to launch out toward a new life.” Morejón echoes this play of absences and presences in her poem, both through the content (the past, Olokún, Fresneda herself who has died), as well as through the rhythms and pacing of the words, which stream towards the reader in little waves. For Hélène Cixous (1991, 63), poetry means traveling on foot: “Walking, dancing, pleasure: these accompany the poetic act. . . . So perhaps dreaming and writing have to do with traversing the forest, journeying through the world, using all available means of transport, using your body as a form of transport.” Why is the imagination a voyage, a movement of images? Because it entails a kind of pursuit: of a transformation of the real, traveling to the manigua of meaning, the domain of the imaginary. In a recent talk Morejón (1995b) spoke of García Lorca’s definition of poetry as “penetrating a jungle at night in order to hunt precious animals, otherwise known as words.” This magical and perilous hunting expedition will have the author equating dancing and writing: “dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen—that one must learn how to write?” (Nietzsche, 76). In this dance, Morejón choreographs the juncture of myth, history, and the imagination of the artist.

The author has spoken eloquently about the gestation of poems like “Elegguá’s Eyes” and “Elegy for Nieves Fresneda” as being the humble Havana neighborhood she grew up in. It is worth quoting at length, because it offers the “lived experience” of historical and mythical themes:

I believe in the oral tradition as a loving source of dispersed identities, spread out among the territories and seas of the Gulf. My own literary creations have drawn from that oral tradition.

I was born and raised in a Havana neighborhood known as Los Sitios, where I learned early on to relate to my city—a constant theme in my poems. Life put me in touch with songs and rhythms which were of an anonymous character, this being the essential root of its power. Voices in the late morning would bring a sad melody, evoking the death of a loved one. They were the moving “coros de clave” ‘chorus with clave rhythm,’ so much part of Havana, so eroded by the dust of roads and seas, since that singing had been passed on from mouth to mouth, coming from faraway lands. It was a wandering music and we had no idea if it was from a patio in Andalucía or a museke from Luanda. Truly it was a kind of combustible magic, whose smoke rose from the plaza Antón Recio all the way to the corners of Peñalver and Manrique. My childhood was marked by these nomadic musicians who went from neighborhood to neighborhood sharing their music generously, out of the simple pleasure of making themselves happy or to brighten up the threadbare night of poverty-stricken neighbors.

There I heard ancient rumbas performed with the hands and muscles (making the sound of drums) of those *rumberos* who never needed a percussion instrument. These were the “rumbas de cajón” ‘rumbas played on a box.’ The beats or strokes—hand against hand, hands against the chest or legs, filled with a blessed, loving African energy, would validate the flamenco spirit which lay dormant in the rhythms of the nation. The sounding of those rumbas were born of those skins and improvised instruments played to accompany the *ñañigo diablitos* (little devils of the Abakuá religion) or *íremes* that appeared on the street on Three Kings Day or during funeral ceremonies. The energy of those sounds throbs in poems of mine like “Elegy for Nieves Fresneda,” and “The Eyes of Elegguá,” among others. (Morejón, 1995b)

The author’s reference to the rumba is important, because it is a central element in Cuban popular culture. As her remembrance states, they were (and are) fairly spontaneous and

celebratory moments. People gather in the streets, some with instruments or boxes, the singing begins (often with call and response) and people begin to dance, forming a chain of feeling from the feet up. Unlike the music of *santería*, the *rumba*'s Afro-Cuban roots are not religious. It's important to recall that the influence of the *rumba* on Morejón's poetry is not a mimetic one. She does not try to rhythmically imitate it, but instead incorporate "the energy of those sounds." And of course, the poems, despite the freewheeling, spontaneous feel they might have, are anything but improvised.

"The "monte" 'bush, thicket, brush,' and the sea become an integral part of mythic poetry. In the Caribbean, there is always a voyage, always a ship" (Morejón, 1995a). These poles form the title of one of her poems, "Montes y mares," from *Piedra Pulida* (*Polished Stone*). *El monte* and the sea: two geographic spaces marked by nature and history. But in this long poem, Morejón is more allusive, using a continuous metaphoric stream that expands the mystery it seems to offer us. She plays with the reader, giving clues that slip away, like an elusive lover. At first reading, it seems like a love poem, and there is no reason to abandon this view. But there's a lot more. In the second stanza she mentions the eyes of someone that cause great peace, eyes that are "the legitimate children of this song" (Morejón, 66). Quickly she begins a "new scene": "The crops return to source. It is the time/of the peacock. What slowness in supplication./A woodcutter breathes/the hollow of the valleys/And you take me away with those eyes of unscathed water/ to the monte" (66). What is the time of the peacock? Morejón seems to be indicating a profound temporal change, even sacred. The peacock, of course, has along association with immortality, longevity, resurrection, as well as love. (Could this be an oblique reference to St. Pol-Roux's "Le Paon," "The Peacock"?) The peacock's feather is the sign of St. Barbara, the supplication referred to (*preces* in Spanish) are entreaties to God. St. Barbara is syncretized as Changó in *santería*, who is often shown with a hatchet or ax, like the woodcutter. The poet is not affixing labels, however, it is still the magic of love being awakened in someone that is being described. But she is taking the mystery and wonder of love and linking them up to a wider net of meaning: nature,

religious sentiment (Christian and Afro-Cuban), the mesmerizing eyes that enchant or bewitch, plus going to el monte.

The poem's use of language is curious, combining rich, sensual details with words, that if not arcane, are still not very common. They are by no means disruptive or out of place, but they have a glow that is reminiscent of a precious stone, no small feat in a poem brimming with luminous images. The words have a strong Castilian ring to them, which contrasts with the island nature of the poem (sea, sand, coral, etc.). It helps contribute to a certain lively tension that the poem has throughout, giving it a strange atmosphere. There is an almost lazy drift of images, followed by vigorous brushstrokes and energetic tableaux. It even evokes previous poems by the author: "mar de nostalgia como mares poblándose" 'sea of nostalgia like seas being peopled' brings to mind the verse "el agua sin fin de la memoria" "the endless water of memory" from "Nubario," as well as her poem about the movie "Solaris." Despite the shafts of light that fall on many passages there is a feel to this poem of a "sombre, voluptuous dream," which is how Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* has been described. This might seem farfetched, but it is not, and the end of the poem even sounds like Mélisande talking: "and an inspired enigma throws me into your arms/so as to live with you in a star." Debussy, and Maeterlinck (whose play the opera is based on) were both enthralled by the work of Edgar Allan Poe.

And it is Poe that Morejón quotes in a recent talk about her own poetry, titled simply "Poetics." After discussing García Lorca's metaphor of hunting words like precious animals in a jungle at night (previously mentioned), she turns to the master of the macabre tale. In her words:

The other concept of poetry or of composing poetry to which I'm close to, is, strangely enough, that of Edgar Allan Poe. I say strangely because he's so apparently distant from me in terms of language, race, gender, and social milieu, and yet, his brief and extraordinary essay that accompanies his famous poem "The Raven," moves me. It's not by chance that Poe entitled these reflections "The Philosophy of Composition," whose pedagogical luminosity should serve as the guide for

all teaching on the writing vocation. I was able to distinguish two phenomena he mentions as integral to my own creativity: the originality that flows from ecstasy as well as a unique sense of the beautiful. According to Poe: "Most writers, poets in especial [sic], prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy, an ecstatic intuition." Later he adds the following: "The point, I mean, that beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem [. . .] My first object, as usual, was originality." (Morejón, 1995b)

This apparently surprising admission is not so striking, as we shall see. It's important to recall what Poe meant by beauty as being something that transcends the physical, echoing perhaps Plato in this regard. Here are his words: "That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul*—not of intellect, or of heart—upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of 'contemplating the beautiful' (Bradley, 890). I think the key word in Poe's definition is *effect*, and how he distinguishes it from a quality. That distinction is crucial for Morejón as well. Beauty is not just a proportioned array of attractive traits and shapes, but a state induced by the power of imagery and rhythm, by the flow of events and words capable of eliciting the movement of the imagination, "the elevation of the soul." Poe's choice of the word ecstasy is even more revealing, as it literally means to be out of the body. Perhaps that is the greatest tension, then, that lies in the poem "Montes y Mares." On the one hand it is most definitely a poem about the body and the senses, yet as it progresses it seeks to transcend them, stake out the "province of beauty." As it does, it draws a perimeter, a map of chasms, perhaps exemplifying the words of Simone Weil: "Distance is the soul of beauty."

Morejón's historical understanding and insight, as well as her generosity are poignantly evident from these observations on Poe. In the same essay, "The Philosophy of Composition,"

Poe speaks about the importance of melancholy, as a universally poetic state that can move readers or listeners. Nothing is better for inducing melancholy than death, but for Poe death must be linked to Beauty. And so he states: "The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover" (Bradley, 892). Morejón's feminist consciousness would disapprove of this kind of statement, which, of course, doesn't mean that the death of a beautiful woman can't be a poetic topic, nor its effectiveness diminished by writing it from the point of view of a bereaved lover. Her sympathy for Poe is not naive, nor does her critical stance make her unable to see his important contributions to aesthetic theory. This is not a trivial point since at different moments during the Cuban Revolution, a certain one-dimensional Marxist cultural theory would either ignore crucial elements of an author's work (like the religious dimension of César Vallejo's poetry) or dismiss the work on political grounds (Paz, Sarduy, Borges, Cabrera Infante, Arenas).

In another poem from *Piedra pulida*, called "Mundos" 'Worlds,' Morejón seems to be carrying on a conversation with Dulce María Loynaz. As in the latter's *Ultimos días de una casa* (1958), both are centered on images of a house or home. But the younger poet's version is radically different, its optimism, though tempered, radiates throughout the poem. The comparison brings out what the Cuban Revolution meant for two different women: one older, upper class, white, and a professional; the other young, black, and working-class. Though I make a direct historical reference here, it is not as overt in the poem, but nonetheless, this history underlies its imagery. This said, the reader must proceed with caution since this is not an openly political poem, at least not in a partisan sense.

The poem's principal refrain is "Mi casa es un gran barco" 'My house is a grand ship'; perhaps "venerable vessel" would give it the more exalted image that gran barco implies. Every stanza of the poem begins repeating this verse, and stanza six repeats it again within the body of that section. So what does the author tell us about her "ark?" Morejón begins with an

apparent contradiction: the house is a ship but it doesn't want to embark on its journey, its masts and riggings become roots. It ends with three powerful and vexing verses: "can I say the sea/ watched over by the son/ or by the fetid gold of the ransacked galleon?" The image is deliriously baroque, as if some all-seeing Polyphemus was ready to devour the sea. But the delirium is reigned in by the historical reference: "the fetid gold of the ransacked galleon." The gold described as fetid adds a psychoanalytic layer to its meaning as well (money as filth or excrement).

The second stanza maintains the ocular elements that the poem begins with, ending with "Oh the furtive eyes of the mortal past." Here the author seems to establish the closest of affinities with Loynaz's poem, but in Morejón the shadow of the past isn't the anchor of the poem, as is the case with Loynaz. The barco/casa is like a sponge that seeks to absorb everything: "Old world that I love,/new world that I love, / worlds, worlds the two, my worlds: /Oh the sacred tortoises; /ah the algae/ah the name of the coastal woman/anchored in the center of the world." Loynaz's poem is one of loneliness, silence, solitude, and dark forebodings; Morejón, despite retrieving certain dark moments of the past, displays an optimism about the future which is entirely absent from Loynaz.

The house/vessel is almost free of demons because she has threatened them into retreat, she wants a house where "good fortune reigns supreme." In the following stanza, the last, she reiterates the ship or house as something that protects her and ends the poem as follows: "I live in the my ship live/sheltered from thunder and lightning/My house is that grand ship [venerable vessel]/I say/ over the golden island/ in which I will die" (Morejón, 108). The sheltering images of the house are not merely an inward phenomenon or a place to flee the outside world; in Morejón's house they are the starting point to embrace the world, meet it head on. This is most evident in the stanza where she refers to a slave who tells her, "Vamos a andar" 'Let us stride together' and "we both plant our legs in the earth/like unscathed tree trunks, like built nests/ embracing beneath the tempest" (Morejón, 107). And right after she says "I think of the time of polished stone," which is the title

of the book, an image taken up again in the final poem of the book, also called “Piedra pulida” ‘Polished Stone.’

This last poem is brief and worth quoting in its entirety:

A new book,
a new day,
another new city
more summers, more flowers,
that perpetual sea,
and now, I,
over polished stone,
I look for your lips,
I look for your eyes.

The mood of this poem is even more upbeat than the previous poem, but it retains a sense of longing, of renewed desire. Stones have a strong cosmic resonance, as we saw in discussing “The Eyes of Elegguá” which began this chapter. The “otá” or “otán,” ‘sacred stone,’ is where an orisha’s aché is gathered, in the Afro-Cuban tradition. And of course, their solidity has always been associated with immortality, imperishability, the indestructible element of ultimate reality. But Morejón goes a little farther, since polished stone, aside from evoking an archeological term (neolithic age), also denotes something worked on, perfected, changed, or transformed. Like the poem or the aesthetic object, which can also be polished but must be made to endure. The ending of the poem reinforces this view, recalling the famous “stones that speak” from which the divine oracle at Delphi would issue forth. Morejón’s poem also seems to evoke that extraordinary interview of Lezama Lima where he says: “I remember that phrase by Nietzsche: ‘Wherever there’s a stone there will be an image’” (CILCA, 70). And yet Morejón delivers the lines with the intimacy that one would use in addressing a lover. The mere nine verses achieve a synthesis of wonder, a hymn to simple pleasures, a self-reflexive meditation and love poem.

Before turning to *Paisaje célebre* and some of the poems that deal with her immediate surroundings, it’s necessary to discuss some of Morejón’s more overt “feminist” work. Two poems in particular will prove useful: “Amo a mi Amo” ‘I Love my Master,’ and “Mujer Negra” ‘Black Woman.’ “I Love

My Master,” also from *Piedra Pulida* (100), is steeped in history, and the poet puts herself in the shoes of a black woman slave talking about her master. It is constructed as a paradigmatic situation, since neither the master nor the slave are named as individuals. Morejón’s poem is laced with enormous irony which begins from the first verse. Unfortunately, the English doesn’t retain the richness of the Spanish “Amo a mi amo,” which feels like a palindrome. The echo effect further underlines the irony between the verb “amar” ‘love’ and the noun “amo” ‘master.’ Love is in this context an act of submission. Morejón’s poem deftly exploits all the contradictions of the situation:

I love his roving pirate’s feet/that have pillaged foreign lands./ . . . he strummed his vihuela [ancient guitar] and/melodious couplets soared,/as though from Manrique’s throat./I longed to hear a marímbula sound./I love his fine red mouth,/that speaks words I can’t understand./The language I speak to him/still isn’t his own. (Morejón, 75)

The body, music, language, everything reflects the colonial and slave relationship, but the poem deals with gender specific oppression as well. In her well-known essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” Adrienne Rich draws on the analysis of Kathleen Gough, relating the characteristics of male power over women. She mentions eight categories:

1) to deny women their own sexuality; 2) to force male sexuality on them; 3) to command or exploit their labor (or control their produce); 4) to control or rob them of their children; 5) to confine them physically and prevent their movement; 6) to use them as objects in male transactions; 7) to cramp their creativeness; and 8) to withhold from them large areas of society’s knowledge and cultural attainments. (Rich, 207-08)

Morejón’s poem could be read as exemplifying most of these eight categories. “Amo a mi Amo” deals directly with points one, two, three, five, seven and eight; and by implication of the historical circumstances recreated, all of them.

But Morejón has the slave questioning her plight: "What's he going to say to me?/Why do I live in this hole not fit for a bat?/ Why do I wait on him hand and foot?/ Where does he go in his lavish coach/drawn by horses that are luckier than me?" (Morejón, 1985 75-77). And further, she dreams of rebellion, of freedom: "I love my master but every night/When I cross the blossoming path to the canefield/ the secret place of our acts of love,/ I see myself knife in hand,/ flaying him like an innocent animal" (Morejón, 77). But the ending of the poem leaves the female slave at a crossroads. Of course one's sympathies are with the slave's yearning for freedom, but the poet has the dream of freedom rudely interrupted: "Bewitched drumbeats/ now drown his cries, his sufferings./ The bells of the sugar-mill call . . ." This is the bell that calls the slaves back to work. Will the dream become a reality? Will she heed the calling of the bells or become a "cimarrona" 'runaway slave?' Morejón does not take the easy way out by producing an obvious outcome: she leaves it up to the reader to imagine. Despite the ironic nature of the poem, the frequent "I loves" of the slave should be taken seriously: they indicate an identification and/or love of the master which is a commonplace of the oppressor/oppressed relation. Of course, it is a twisted love, deformed by male domination and (self)-devaluation of women, but the author significantly chooses to make it have weight within the overall context of the historical situation depicted. Morejón seems to be issuing a warning: liberation from oppression doesn't mean the past vanishes. It is a long process, an ongoing dialogue with the forces of the past, and if we ignore it, we continue to run the risk of bringing it back, sometimes in even deadlier forms.

In "Mujer Negra" Morejón revisits history again, but in a much more rebellious spirit. Although there are references to the Middle Passage, to back-breaking work and injustice, the poem focuses on the resistance to the iniquities of race and class. It even draws a historical affinity between Maceo and the Cuban revolutionaries of the XIX century and the July 26th movement led by Fidel Castro's guerrilla army. And it ends with considerable optimism towards the goals and achievements of the Cuban Revolution, with great enthusiasm about the future. Despite the rational and thought-out nature of the

poem, the poet reminds us that writing a poem is not the same as documentary history or the elaboration of a political manifesto. Speaking of this poem, she says:

Writing, however, is an act of absolute irrationality. A perfect example of this is found in my poem "Mujer negra" 'Black Woman,' so well-known and received by my readers. I remember perfectly that I was sleeping and was awakened by the image of a black woman behind the bars of the small common room which I shared with my parents. She was an ample woman and wouldn't let me sleep. I looked at her quite intently, wanting her to let me keep sleeping, until she went away. The next morning the first thing that came into my mind was the memory of that image. The black woman returned and dictated the poem to me. I struggled a lot with the end. It wasn't easy finding it because the "I" of that woman was an epic "we," which was all mixed up with my personal experience of living in Cuba in the 1970s." (Morejón, 1995b)

In this same Missouri address, Morejón admits that her contribution to Cuban letters resides in the fact that she's a woman and black. As a woman she quotes Virginia Woolf's "We think back through our mothers, if we are women." She always begins her poetry readings with the same poem, "Madre" 'Mother,' from *Piedra Pulida* (1986):

My mother did not have a garden
but steep, cliffed islands
floating under the sun,
on delicate coral.
Not a free branch was there
on the orphan girl but many clubs.
What a time, when barefoot she would run
on the lime of the orphanages
and she didn't know how to laugh
and she couldn't even look at the horizon.
She had neither an ivory hall
nor a wicker room
nor the silent vitraux of the tropics.

My mother had her song and her shawl
to rock the promise of my affections
and to raise her unheeded queen's head
to leave us her hands, like precious stones,
before the cold remains of the enemy.

(Translation: Joy Renjilian-Burgy in Agosín, ed., 173)

This extraordinary poem, heartfelt and tender, is also hard as nails. There is no sentimentality at any moment, but instead a spirited and quiet heroism that is nothing less than inspirational. Morejón comments on this poem: "Virginia Woolf lived convinced that behind each woman writer fluttered the ghost of her mother. I'm no exception to this. So it's not just that my mother is a symbol of my poetry because she engendered me, but because, without any resources, she raised me, she gave me an education, she instilled in me the longing for independence, and she showed me forms of refinement to which I am still grateful" (Morejón, 1995b). Nowadays we say that someone is a survivor, and clearly that has taught the author much about life, which in an interview she explains as such: "Women also have a special vision that is born of pain, and pain smartens one up a great deal" (Behar, 629).

Morejón clearly admits that her specificity as a writer derives from being a woman and black, but she interjects a note of caution: "This doesn't mean I'm a strident feminist. I don't tend to be strident about anything" (Behar 628-29). This comment might cause concern among North American feminists familiar with the pairing up of these two words by forces hostile to feminist thought. There is an analogy with Marxism, where if you admit to being a Marxist you always have to qualify it by saying, yes, but not a dogmatic one. But Morejón's words must be understood in the Cuban context of a revolutionary society under assault from a powerful adversary, where ideological debate is often strident. For example, if someone chooses to leave Cuba and emigrate to the United States, they are called a counterrevolutionary at best, a "gusano" 'worm' or "escoria" 'scum, dregs' at worst. Now gusano is a loaded word in Cuba: the epithet is not only a personal insult, but calls into question a whole series of other attributes. The

motive doesn't have to be overtly political (family reunification, desire to travel, work, or study); leaving can not be an individual choice, but a political statement tantamount to treason. It means you have abandoned your patriotic duty to defend the Cuban revolution, and by extension the sacred territory of the Cuban nation. From one moment to the next you become an outlaw to Cubanidad, or Cuban-ness. This example might be considered exceptional, but it really isn't: the nature of different types of ideological stridency permeate the Cuban system that run through politics, education, sexuality, and culture.

Morejón is equally cautious about issues of race. Though she points out her blackness as a factor that has shaped her political and cultural sensibility, she's keenly aware of how that can be used against her, either because of racism, trivialization, superficial exoticism, and tokenism. Here are her words: "Race in the Caribbean has been a fountain of events, a catalyst, an incentive, an act of faith, and more often than not, a narcotic. But if closed in on itself, racial attitudes, negritude can become a dead end. Nicolás Guillén addressed this admirably when he said, 'It's like trying to find a black cat in a dark room.' Or Wole Soyinka, who with a certain irony, speaks of tigers defending their tiger-tude" (Morejón, 1995a). Morejón in this regard, practices and embodies a transcultural aesthetic. In this she is indebted to Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969) and Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), two Cuban authors who sought to explore the racial, economic, religious, and cultural complexities of Cuban identity as a unique amalgam of Spanish, African, Chinese and other ethnicities.

For Morejón the concept of transculturation does imply "mestizaje" 'racial mixing,' but it is not necessarily the only or even most important component, ultimately. It involves a dynamic interaction at every level: food, dress, music, folklore, "santería" 'religious belief,' and community interaction. She sums up the idea of transculturation thusly:

Transculturation signifies constant interaction, transmutation between two or more cultural components whose unconscious end is the creation of a third cultural whole—that is, culture—new and independent, although its bases,

its roots, rest on preceding elements. The reciprocal influence is determining. No element is superimposed on the other; on the contrary, each one becomes a third entity. One remains immutable. All change and grow in a give and take which engenders a new texture. (Pérez Sarduy, 229)

These new textures are what we've discussed in Morejón's poetry, not only in the poems with obvious Afro-Cuban themes like "The Eyes of Elegguá" and "Elegy to Nieves Fresneda," but in ones that seem more "universal," like "Montes y mares," "Mundos," or "Polished Stone," or in "city" poems like "Amor, Ciudad Atribuida." But like any good Caribbean poet, Morejón appropriates all the traditions when she creates her verses. She goes from the world of the orishas to quoting Eluard or Rilke; she draws on Cuban authors like Martí, Lezama, or Eliseo Diego, Havana street scenes and when she describes the ocean she casts the net even wider, evoking popular ballads or songs, Rimbaud, as well as Yoruba and Greek mythology. Perhaps, because "There is always a ship, always a voyage," as the author says, the Caribbean is always adding new layers of culture, meaning, and identity (Morejón, 1982). By being the crossroads of so many interests and cultures (European, Indigenous, African, and Asian), every work of art is also an epic, a journey, a new cosmology, a creation myth. Maybe this is what Carpentier meant when he said that "America is a long way from having exhausted its mythologies." Transculturation always implies an unfinished subject, something constantly evolving, changing, adding new elements, witnessing new births and so in the realm of culture it calls for renewed attempts at new definitions. Each new definition becomes a creation myth.

Some new textures to her own work are seen in her most recent book, *Paisaje Célebre* (1993, *Famed Landscape*). This short book of poems is more philosophical and rueful than her previous work, with a greater concern expressed about time and the nature of absence. The author's personal circumstances changed: she traveled and several of those times to the United States. A rarity among Cuban families, Morejón's had all remained in Cuba after the Revolution. She had never directly lived (or suffered) the experience of being almost totally cut off from family. By traveling to the U.S. and having

to take letters back or by meeting Cuban-Americans like Lourdes Casal, Ana Mendieta, Sonia Rivera and others, who traveled to Cuba exploring their own personal and political turmoil, Morejón has been able to witness one of the saddest dimensions of Cuban family life, one of the many human tolls of Revolution.

Paisaje Célebre has at least three poems that deal with this issue specifically: "A Chronicle That Swoons Before the Immigrant Tree," "Before a Mirror," and "Ana Mendieta." "Before a Mirror" is dedicated to Sonia Rivera Valdés, a Cuban-born professor at York College. It is a hauntingly beautiful poem about how the city you were born in continues to pursue you no matter how far away you are. Its phantasmatic presence is more real than all the shapes and cities that surround you. It ends like this:

Wherever you might move
 you'll hear the same streetcry every morning,
 be on the same boat crossing the same route,
 the route of eternal emigrants.
 Nothing will put you in place, anywhere.
 Though you scavenge the world over,
 from castle to castle,
 from market to market,
 this will always be the city of your phantoms.
 You will have spent your life rather fruitlessly
 and when you are an old woman
 before a mirror, as in Cinderella,
 you will smile half-sadly
 and in your dry pupils
 will be two faithful rocks
 and a resonant corner of your city.

(Translation: David Frye in Behar, 622)

The structure of the poem is built around looking into a mirror, so to speak. The exile looks at new cities and countries, trying to see if they will mirror their reality or identity. Naturally, there is a frustration, because that reflection is interfered with by the very disruption and displacement of exile. As the poem says: "No other country, no other city is possible" (Behar,

621). The poem is in dialogue with another poem, by Lourdes Casal, titled “For Ana Veldford,” from her book *Palabras Juntan Revolución* (1981). Casal, a writer-scholar, was one of the first Cubans in exile who attempted to build bridges to her homeland, where she had lived the first twenty odd years of her life. As evidenced in this poem, it was no easy task:

This is why I will always remain on the margins,
a stranger among the stones,
even beneath the friendly sun of this summer’s day,
just as I will remain forever a foreigner,
even when I return to the city of my childhood
I carry this marginality, immune to all turning back,
too habanera to be newyorkina,
too newyorkina to be
—even to become again—
anything else.

(Translation: David Frye in Behar, 416)

This (n)either (n)or dynamic is not strange to exile reality, and it has been a constant preoccupation of Cuban exile writers like Cristina García, Miguel Elías Muñoz, José Kozar, and many others. However, it is refreshing to see it taken up by a poet “from the other side,” that is a writer still living in Cuba. But even more important, is that Morejón avoids the stereotyped “revolutionary” view that they are uprooted Cubans who are on their way to becoming deracinated Anglos with an accent. The Cuban cultural establishment did not even view this literature as Cuban for many years; this has changed but more out of political opportunism than anything else. Morejón sees this literature and concern as important to Cuban literature because it forms part of a Cuban reality, even if it is not confined to the physical geography of the island.

In “Ana Mendieta” (1948-1985) Morejón offers a heartfelt remembrance of the Cuban artist exiled in the U.S., who met a terrible death when she fell from the thirty-fourth floor of her apartment building. Many claim she was shoved by her artist husband Carl André, but he was acquitted. Mendieta emigrated at thirteen, living for five years in an orphanage, an

experience which marked her for life. In 1980 she returned to Cuba and began making a series of rupestrian sculptures in the rock formations of Jaruco. Before that she had been doing "earth sculptures," silhouettes of her body imprinted on soil, similar to the corpse drawings she had done even earlier (all this work was documented in photos or videos). At the risk of simplifying, it was clear that Mendieta's art had a strong link to her search for identity, that rock, earth, and soil were literally dug into in order to affirm her identity, to combat the sense of displacement and uprootedness. Morejón admirably deals with these themes in the poem. She begins the poem in New York, where Mendieta lived: "Ana was fragile as lightning in the sky./She was the most fragile girl in Manhattan." Soon after she mentions her awful demise: "Ana cast into space. Ana, our lady of despair,/ yourself sculpted in the hostile cement of Broadway./ A desert, like the desert/ you found in the orphanages,/ a desert, yellow and gray, reaches you/ and holds you tight, through the air" (Behar, 618-Trans.-D. Frye). But the entire rest of the poem is dedicated to images of flying, floating, birds and kites, as if to suggest that Ana's art, the most terrestrial of work, actually defied gravity, and, of course, death. Morejón, consistent with that imagery, ends the poem in like fashion, with a splendid mood of reconciliation, of Ana returning not only to earth but also returning to her homeland. In her journey she was able to recuperate her lost country and childhood.

Ana, gliding like a kite

[. . .]

Your silhouettes, sleepy, calm,

tip up the multicolored kite

which flees Iowa, skirting indigenous cypresses,

and comes to rest on the sure clouds

of the mountains of Jaruco, in whose humid land

you have been reborn again, wrapped in a celestial
moss

that dominates the rock and caves of the place,

yours now, more than ever.

(Translation: David Frye in Behar, 620)

Morejón, as can be seen from this brief view of her work, is a poet with a vast and powerful range of themes and modes of expression. As she herself has expressed it: "There's no poetics of Nancy Morejón as such, but several of them. The ones that I'm aware of have been forged over forty years. What's important for you to know is that I started to be abducted by poetry since I was nine" (Morejón, 1995b). The opening poem of *Paisaje Célebre* offers a glimpse of the nature of that kind of abduction. It begins with a simple description: "To see the fall of Icarus from a harbor of/ blues and greens of Alamar." The second stanza is cryptic, speaking of "a misanthrope wearing a hood" and a "small man, by himself, toiling above fruit trees /until he joins a rainbow in the sky." The poem ends with a reference to painting and then Icarus again:

That little man
 is a relative of Brueghel, the Elder, dear brother,
 who paints the solitude of the soul
 surrounded by splendid laborers.

It's dusk and I need the wings of Icarus.

(Translation: Alan West in Morejón 11)

Morejón is taking the famed (celebrated) landscape, and examining its exalted and praised history. First she situates it in a mythic landscape by beginning with the fall of Icarus, along with the blue-greens of the harbor or sea. Even the word Alamar is an interesting choice. At a pedestrian level it is a reference to a modern housing project about twenty minutes from Havana, near the sea, where Morejón lives. But the name itself is made up of "ala" and "mar" 'wing and sea' which works as a kind of indirect refrain of Icarus.

The second stanza seems a bit more mysterious, particularly that of the "hooded misanthrope." Visually one thinks of Zurbarán's monks, but the idea behind it seems a throwback to medieval theology or the iniquities of the Inquisition. The following image of the little man plowing above fruit trees and water seems like the flying figures of Mendive, part winged horse or cow, part fish and part human. Only in the third stanza

is the reference brought back to something more familiar: Brueghel the Elder. Although the final references evoke his paintings that have dozens of figures like "The Netherland Proverbs" or "The Battle Between Carnaval and Lent," there is a painting attributed to him called "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus" (c.1555). It is a curious work, with a green sea, someone plowing in the foreground, with a shepherd further below as one's sight goes down rightward toward the ocean. Near a ship there are two legs sticking out of the water, as if capturing the moment of impact of Icarus's body hitting the water. It is sundown. You have to strain to see the two legs and only the brightly lit sky hints at Icarus's travail. Everything else in the painting seems like a quiet landscape, very matter of fact.

Morejón's ending has a Promethean ring to it. Despite Icarus's failure she wants them back to attempt the flight into the unknown, reminiscent of Paul Claudel when he said: "We lack wings, but we always have enough strength to fall." What are these wings for Morejón? The wings of freedom and creation, those of eros, or the four wings of Cronos? Maybe the wings that allow us to "deform what we perceive" (imagination), as we saw with Bachelard when we discussed the poem "Elegy for Nieves Fresneda." In twelve verses she has brought together a vast web of images and cultures to bear on a beautiful Caribbean sundown, in a magnificent "abduction" of the reader.

It would be inaccurate to say that "Paisaje Célebre" synthesizes all of Nancy Morejón's political, historical and aesthetic concerns. But it does reveal an extraordinary amount about history, aesthetics and politics through the voice of a masterful poet. In "Paisaje Celebre," as in her poetic oeuvre in general, Nancy Morejón weaves together nature, politics, myth, creation, and personal testimony so adroitly that they gleam like "the precious stones that are her mother's hands," like the sacred stones that contain an orisha's *aché*, the rough-edged rock of history, or the polished stone of poetry.

Note

1. Nancy Morejón is the human and poetic embodiment of the word transculturation. Firmly rooted in the hybridity of her mulata family, nourished by Spanish and African ancestries, Morejón is a keen observer of Havana street life, with all its rhythms and nuances. Her life and work is also closely intertwined with the course of the Cuban Revolution. Born in 1944, she was fifteen when the Cuban Revolution triumphed, but in many ways she is a "child" of that social upheaval. Her first book of poems, *Mutismos (Silences)* was published in 1962, soon followed by *Amor, ciudad atribuida (Love, Attributed City)* in 1964. *Richard trajo su flauta (1967, Richard Brought His Flute)* was her third book of poetry. Morejón's next book of poems took twelve years to appear, *Parajes de una época 1979, (Parameters of an Epoch)*, though she did a testimonial book co-authored with Carmen Gonce in 1971, *Lengua de pájaro*, as well as editing a volume of criticism on the work of Nicolás Guillén, in 1974 (*Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén*). Since then, Morejón's work has been published often: *Octubre imprescindible (1983, Essential October)*, *Cuaderno de Grenada (1984, Grenada Notebook)*, and *Piedra pulida (1986, Polished Stone)*, one of her best books, a source for many translations of her work. Most recently, *Paisaje célebre (1993, Famed Landscape)* was published in Venezuela, after having won the finalist award in the Pérez Bonalde International Poetry Prize.

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