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CREATOR NOT MUSE: “JUANA BORRERO” (1892) BY JULIÁN DEL CASAL¹

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ABSTRACT:

Julián del Casal’s “Juana Borrero” (1892) has been interpreted as a paternalistic word portrait that limits the female artist to the role of muse. However, analyzing Casal’s use of ekphrasis, which describes Borrero’s creative process rather than her physical appearance or finished artwork, sheds new light on the crónica as a key text of Cuba’s evolving national consciousness, one that centers Juana Borrero as a creator. By representing Borrero as a painter at work on the banks of the Almendares River, a national symbol, Casal frames her artistic practice as a patriotic act that “illustrates the name of the homeland.” Thus, Casal’s juxtaposition of the local Almendares with the European Rhine is not an escapist act of substitution, as some critics have argued, but rather a deliberate strategy of superimposition that elevates the Cuban landscape and positions Borrero on an international stage. Including Borrero’s own poems in the text further fragments Casal’s creative autonomy, asserting her voice and subjectivity. In these ways, Casal’s crónica offers a forward-thinking vision of an expansive Cuban identity, nourished by creative and cultural exchange, anticipating later reflections on art and identity by José Lezama Lima.

Keywords: Julián del Casal; Juana Borrero; modernismo; ekphrasis; Cuban identity; Almendares River; national discourse; art and literature; word portrait; Jose Lezama Lima.

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As generations of readers have pointed out, *modernismo* was a moment of self-examination and innovation that also entailed an outward gaze toward European centers of modernity. It was not in isolation but through this cultural contact that Latin American writers affirmed their independence and literary originality on an international stage (Onís 68, 71). Julián del Casal's (1863–1893) word portrait of Juana Borrero (1877–1896) fits within this tradition, establishing resonances with German and Russian cultures and foreseeing her development and identity as a national artist. In recent years, interest in Borrero has produced thought-provoking approaches to her life and works, often focusing on Casal's *crónica* about the young artist from Puentes Grandes. However, what readers of Casal's word portrait have often missed is how Casal highlights Borrero's identity as a painter through her representation of the Almendares River, an important national symbol. This essay examines the relationship between art, writing and homeland in Casal's *crónica*, illustrating how his portrayal of Borrero participates in the discourse of Cuban identity. By centering Borrero in the artistic and literary canon, Casal's "Juana Borrero" presents a new vision of how the nation is represented and by whom, opening the way for a more plural discourse of what it means to be Cuban. Casal's ekphrasis of Borrero's creative process stimulates a poetics of place that is not about what you can lose by looking outward from a mythologized *patria*, but what you can *learn* by bringing it all home.

My argument is inspired by José Lezama Lima's reflections in "Paralelos. La pintura y la poesía en Cuba (siglos XVIII y XIX)" (1966) and, more specifically, the palimpsest produced by Casal's gaze as he watches Borrero paint her masterpiece, *Pilluelos* (1896), made in Key West just months before her death. Lezama imagines the scene as follows: "Fuerza la mirada: ¿qué es lo que ve? Ya Casal está muerto, pero vuelve a mirar y entonces ve a Juana Borrero pocos días antes de su muerte. La ve que pinta con la misma sabiduría que cuando tenía doce años" ("Paralelos" 147–48). In addition to the resonance of *Pilluelos*, which Lezama compares to Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and considers evocative of an essential Cubanness, what stands out in this encounter imagined by Lezama is Casal's postmortem gaze, his witnessing Borrero paint a work he would not actually live to see (148). In the same fragment, Lezama also alludes to Casal's visit to Puentes Grandes, where he witnessed the young Borrero painting the Almendares River, an experience he would later reconstruct in the *crónica*, "Juana Borrero" (1892). Lezama Lima's reminiscent reasoning brings Casal and Borrero together in a meditation on Cuban identity, superimposing on her masterpiece, which now hangs in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, and her lost landscape painting.² When Esteban Borrero

² *Pilluelos* was relatively unknown at the time that Lezama wrote "Paralelos." Donated by the Borrero family in 1984, it now hangs in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, Cuba as part of the permanent collection, *Arte en la colonia*, curated by Delia María López Campistrous (Campistrous). The only other work by Borrero featured in this collection is her oil on canvas painting, *Las niñas* (n.d.). It is a testament to Borrero's significance that *Pilluelos* was selected as one of a dozen works by Cuban artists for the international exhibit, *Afro-Atlantic Stories*, organized by the São Paulo Art Museum in Brazil from June 29–October 21, 2018, which included 450 works by 214 artists.

visited New York with Juana in 1892, they gave José Martí a watercolor which may have been based on the landscape that Casal describes in his *crónica*, highlighting its symbolic and patriotic value as an artifact of Cuba's national story (Núñez 18). Indeed, Jorge Duany explains that “visual representations of rural and urban landscapes . . . were critical to imagining Cuba as a separate nation with its own culture” before independence (“Cuba” 7). These resonances invite a closer look at what Borrero's art meant to Casal and how Borrero and Casal intervened in Cuba's national discourse.

The word portrait was an important genre for *modernista* writers seeking to define a modern, Latin American subject amid radical cultural and political changes in the second half of the nineteenth century (Lugo-Ortiz, “Escritura” 391). In Cuba, this period coincided with an independence struggle spanning three decades and three armed rebellions during which hundreds of thousands died (Pérez 146).³ Prolonged wartime and widespread depression devastated Cubans' livelihood and public spirit: “There seemed to be no place for Cubans in Cuba” (Pérez 102). The revolution culminated in the war of 1895, which sent the separatist Borrero family into exile in Key West, Florida months before Juana's death in 1896 (Pérez 89–90). Against this backdrop of political and economic crisis, Casal wrote “Juana Borrero,” one of nine *crónicas* about writers and visual artists, including Juana's father, Esteban Borrero Echeverría, Ricardo del Monte, Enrique José Varona, Francisco Zayas, Aurelia Castillo de González, Bonifacio Byrne, José Fornaris, and José Arburu. First published in *La Habana Literaria* in 1892 and posthumously in *Bustos y rimas* (1893), “Juana Borrero” is the first significant interpretation of her work as a poet and painter, and a crucial window into how Cuban intellectuals resisted colonial pressures to claim their place in the nation.

In a movement “characterized by the absences of women's names on lists of writers” (Escaja, “Invención” 2), Casal's *crónicas*, which feature two Cuban women, stand out from other prominent examples of the literary portrait genre: Rubén Darío's *Los raros* (1896) and Manuel de la Cruz's *Cromitos cubanos* (1892). These works are unambiguous examples of cultural and patriarchal gatekeeping. For example, Manuel de la Cruz dedicates his *Cromitos* to Aurelia Castillo, mediating her presence and authority by confining her to the paratextual margins of his album of male figures, which also includes Julián del Casal.⁴ He acknowledges Castillo as a muse—a source of inspiration for the male artist—but not a creator in her own right (Escaja, “Invención” 7). In a similar vein, Beatriz Colombi points out that despite his insistence on Borrero's extraordinary talent, Darío stops short of including her in his own gallery of rarefied figures (4). In his obituary of Borrero, Darío's language is explicitly gendered and paternalistic, describing Borrero as “una rara niña, una dulce y rara niña” (250), “niña tropical” (251), and “pobre y armoniosa

³ The Ten Years' War (1868–1878) ended in a peace settlement, the Pact of Zanjón (1878), and was followed by The Little War (1879–80) (Pérez 89–93).

⁴ It is worth remembering that in a national discourse that equated patriotism with virility, Casal was himself a marginalized figure. In *Cromitos*, for example, Casal is caricatured as a decadent intellectual (309), incompatible with Manuel de la Cruz's “epic vision of reality” (Lugo-Ortiz, “Escritura” 391).

niña” (252). Darío judges Borrero’s poetry, which he had not read at the time, by emphasizing her feelings, nerves, and senses, rather than her intelligence, discipline, and craft, reprising the “stereotype of literary sentimentality” that suppressed women writers (Teipe vi). In these ways, Darío’s “elevation of Borrero” also limits her agency, “tácitamente dándole el lugar de musa y no de practicante de la poesía” (Rivero, “Para Juana Borrero” 57–58). Though Eliana Rivero is not wrong that Casal and Darío “help to specify [Juana’s] place among the first Cuban *modernistas*” (“Para Juana Borrero” 52), conflating their voices obscures how Darío’s rhetoric consigns Borrero to the margins of the *modernista* canon, while Casal’s *crónica* highlights her creative agency as a poet and painter.

Nevertheless, captivated by the biographical details of her short life and fraught friendship with Casal, readers have mythologized Borrero as a *wunderkind* orbiting Casal’s center (Morán, *La pasión* xxii).⁵ Admittedly, Casal’s own poem, “Virgen triste” (1893), participates in this construction of Borrero as an exceptional yet marginalized artist within *modernismo*: “La imagen y el cuerpo de Juana Borrero . . . se ponen al servicio de los principios de la identidad y expresión nacional” (Escaja, “Autoras modernistas” 62). In a similar vein, Casal’s *crónica* has been cited more often than not as an example of literary paternalism. While Luis A. Jiménez acknowledges that Casal introduced Borrero as a “key figure of her moment” (79), he interprets the association of Borrero and the Cuban landscape as an attempt to mythologize her as the “mother country” (81), illustrating how the male-controlled discourse of *modernismo* de-historicized women as abstractions (“mujer/paisaje”) (Vallejo, “Muse” 80). Agnes Lugo-Ortiz nuances this argument further, affirming that, read as a whole, Casal’s *crónicas* “propose a patriarchal model in defining the Cuban lettered community at the fin-de-siècle” (“Escritura” 391) that is also rooted in the polarization of foreign and local, idealizing “the flight toward a cultural European space” (“Escritura” 391–92). In her recent *Juana Borrero: Choreografie-ner Künstlerin* (2023), Anne Kern hews closely to these established interpretations of Casal and Borrero’s relationship, finding that Casal projects onto Borrero a misogynistic iconography (324–26).⁶ While there is merit to these critiques, Casal’s *crónica* does not categorically endorse the patriarchal values that limited women’s agency (Vallejo, “Women Writers” 513).

⁵ Borrero and Casal probably met in early 1891 at the Borrero family home in Puentes Grandes, which was a center of literary *tertulias* (Morán, *La pasión* ix). The daughter of the poet and physician Esteban Borrero Echeverría and the writer Consuelo Pierra, Borrero studied at the renowned San Alejandro National Academy of Fine Art in 1886, where she impressed with her natural talent and confidence (Casal, *Prosas* 270). Casal alludes to only two meetings with Borrero in his *crónica*, but Borrero’s letters to her fiancé Carlos Pío Uhrbach suggest a closer friendship (Morán, *La pasión* xii–xiii). Casal and Borrero became estranged under mysterious circumstances in November of 1892, and Casal died before they were able to repair the rift. In 1896, Borrero and her family were forced to abandon Cuba for Key West as political exiles, and Borrero died the same year at the age of eighteen.

⁶ Here, Kern is persuaded by the image projected onto Casal of the jaded, decadent intellectual whose “desensitized melancholy” led him to withdraw from life and seek refuge in an interior realm of art (329), a view that has been called into question by Oscar Montero, Francisco Morán, Antonio José Ponte, Jorge Brioso, and others.

Casal's correspondence with Esteban Borrero and Aurelia Castillo shows how the word portrait, and letter writing itself, were important means of forging networks of *reciprocal* support and friendship. In their letters, Castillo and Casal express their mutual respect, share insecurities, offer words of encouragement and critiques, and convey gratitude for the role the other plays in publicizing and contextualizing their work for an audience that was often unsympathetic (Casal, *Epistolario* 239–49). The letters exchanged between Casal and Esteban Borrero in May of 1891 provide further context for Casal's word portrait of Borrero, which is an answer to the unauthorized publication of her sonnet, "Vespertino" in the literary journal, *La Habana Elegante*, and the harsh critique by Paul Coronado that followed (Casal, *Epistolario* 306; Glickman 365). In "Juana Borrero," Casal formally reintroduces Borrero to her reading public and presents four of her poems. What stands out in his description of Borrero is not her youth or psyche but her activity as a painter and poet, amplifying her identity as a creator.

As Jiménez also notes, Casal centers Borrero's craft by introducing her through her palette and paintbrush ("El retrato verbal" 81), while the comparison between Borrero and the proto-feminist Russian diarist and painter, Marie Bashkirtseff (1858–1884),⁷ puts her forward as an artist of international resonance. Jiménez adds that in the verses Casal dedicates to Borrero in the *crónica*, her hands are a metonymy for her artistic abilities, drawing attention to her skill as well as her physical attributes ("El retrato verbal" 80–81).⁸ But Casal's word portrait far surpasses this metonymy: its focal point is a lengthy meditation on Borrero's artistic *practice* as a poet and painter through which she asserts her subjectivity as a creator, not a muse.

That Borrero's poetic vision is a guidepost for an aesthetic and national conscience that problematizes patriarchal values is reinforced by the four poems written by Borrero and included in the text of the *crónica*. "Todavía," "Crepuscular," "Apolo," and "Las hijas de Ran" (1891) give direct access to Borrero's own thoughts in her own words. For example, in "Todavía," a wistful poem written in the first-person point of view about her own childhood, Borrero's poetic subject claims creative authority over her own experiences through strategies that draw attention to her voice, including apostrophe, interrogation and exclamation:

⁷ Bashkirtseff's diary, *Journal de Marie Bashkirtseff, avec un portrait*, published posthumously in 1887, documents her personal life from adolescence to adulthood, and her feelings as a young artist struggling against a patriarchal system that suppressed her talent (Zarevich). For Luis Jiménez, the comparison underscores the relationship among literature, the visual arts and female creativity ("El retrato verbal" 81). Alfredo Villanueva-Collado studies Bashkirtseff's significance in the *fin de siglo* imagination in José Asunción Silva's novel, *De sobremesa*.

⁸ A useful contrast is Rubén Darío's obituary, "Juana Borrero," in which Darío fixates on Borrero's angelic femininity and childlike innocence, describing women as souls, flowers ("desaparecidas flores" and "vegetación femenina") and supernatural "uterine" beings (252). His rhetoric is an example of how male writers reduced women to an abstract entity, the "eternal feminine," in order to aggrandize their own masculine power of speech and sexuality (Gilbert and Gubar 4).

¿Por qué tan pronto oh mundo! Me brindaste
 Tu veneno amarguísimo y letal? . . .
 ¿Por qué de mi niñez el lirio abierto
 Te gozas en tronchar? (*La pasión* 5)

Next to the introspective and personal “Todavía,” “Crepuscular” describes a sultry landscape in which the dominant notes of synesthesia and allusion are intertextual conduits to Casal (“nevadas flores,” line 5) and Darío (“los cisnes,” line 4). In this way, Borrero demonstrates her command of the language and style of *modernismo* and locates herself among two of its canonical figures:

Todo es quietud y paz . . . En la penumbra
 Se respira el olor de los jazmines,
 Y, más allá, sobre el cristal del río,
 Se escucha el aleteo de los cisnes
 Que, como grupo de nevadas flores
 Resbalan por la tersa superficie. (9)

In “Apolo,” Borrero’s poetic “I” subverts the binary and hierarchical opposition between subject and object, masculine and feminine, creator and created by reimagining the *modernista* trope of the statue:

Contra su pecho inmóvil, apretada
 Adoré su belleza indiferente,
 Y al quererla animar, desesperada,
 Llevada por mi amante desvarío,
 Dejé mil besos de ternura ardiente
 Allí apagados sobre el mármol frío! (21)

Here, a motif used by male writers to objectify and silence the feminine figure is inverted by the poetic subject in order to claim creative autonomy and resist patriarchal stereotypes: “El sujeto femenino se protege de la conversión en objeto, idolatrando al objeto de su amor a la vez que inmovilizándolo para siempre en la incorporeidad del no-hombre” (Ette 91).

While “Apolo” is an inversion of the binary and hierarchical relationship between a masculine creative subject and a feminine art object, there is no male presence in “Las hijas de Ran,” which centers on the playful interaction between the ondines:

Envueltas entre espumas diamantinas
 Que salpican sus cuerpos sonrosados
 Por los rayos del sol iluminados,
 Surgen del mar en grupos las ondinas.
 Cubriendo sus espaldas peregrinas
 Descienden los cabellos destrenzados,
 Y al rumor de las olas van mezclados
 Los ecos de sus risas argentinas.

Así viven contentas y dichosas
 Entre el cielo y el mar, regocijadas,
 Ignorando tal vez que son hermosas,
 Y que las olas, entre sí rivales,
 Se entrechocan de espuma coronadas
 Por estrechar sus formas virginales. (23)

The sea is a horizontal space of shared female power and sensuality where beauty and purity are attributes loosened from the constraints of literary paternalism. The ondines laugh and move freely for their own pleasure, while the waves (also a feminine force) compete to embrace them. Borrero's poem could be an allusion to the daughters of the Rhine, as Mercedes Borrero suggests in an interview with Fina García Marruz: "nos ha dicho que había buscado este nombre de Ran en todas las mitologías sin hallar ninguna explicación acerca de él, lo cual la hace pensar que se trate más bien de "Las hijas del Rhin" (qtd. in Morán, *La pasión* 268).⁹ But it could also be that Borrero's marine landscape depicts the daughters of Rán (Henry), a Norse deity identified with the female power of the sea (Quinn 84–85). Rán's nine daughters, the ondines, are named for the waves "connoting their bright upward surge," a metaphor for their agency (Quinn 92–93).

In her poems, Borrero presents herself as a capable and courageous writer whose poetic subjects claim the power of speech and explore the themes of feminine strength and desire, reworking tropes used by male writers to restrict women to the role of "literary and sensual object" (Gilbert and Gubar 8). If Casal's *crónica* cannot entirely escape the dynamic of the male biographer's gaze on his subject, the poems intercalated into the middle of the text introduce Borrero's voice and point of view, fragmenting his literary autonomy.

The reader's explicit presence is another tactic that expands the *crónica*'s perspective beyond Casal's gaze and relationship to his subject. Framed as a dialogue, the *crónica* is a public facing representation of an historically situated artist,¹⁰ beginning with the invitation to meet Borrero:

¿Queréis conocerla? Tomad el tren que sale, a cada hora, de la estación de Concha, para los pueblecillos cercanos a nuestra población . . . Frente al río célebre, citado por los periodistas mediocres y ensalzado por los copleros

⁹ Teipe suggests that Borrero's sonnet could be an ekphrasis of a painting depicting "the daughters of the Rhine" (57–58). The origin of the painting is unknown but a facsimile was included in Fina García Marruz's edition of Borrero's poetry, *Poesías* (1966). The daughters of the Rhine were a common motif in turn-of-the-century European art and sculpture. See for example *Die Töchter des Rheins* by the Austrian painter, Georg Kuler (1883) and Henri Fantin-Latour's lithograph, "Siegfried und die Töchter des Rheins" (1886) based on Wagner's operatic cycle *Der Ring der Nibelungen*. See also the monument *Vater Rhein und seine Töchter* (1897).

¹⁰ Here, I am guided by Luis A. Jiménez's contention, following Elizabeth Bruss, that biography is a historically situated, public act. See "Casal y la poética de la 'Autobiografía'," p. 11. See also Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts*, pp. 8–10.

populares, que se encuentra a mitad del camino, descendido del ferrocarril. En su morada, que se mira en las ondas, siempre la podréis encontrar (*Prosa I*, 264).

The use of the imperative mood and future tense present this meeting as a credible future event that takes place on Cuban soil: Casal invites his readers to travel within the island's borders, to visit a local artist who stands by the river, a recognizable national symbol, in order to observe her painting the landscape of her home. To see Borrero paint is to bear witness to her existence and her skill, and her proximity and accessibility cast doubt on Jiménez's claim that Casal "means to associate Juana with the myth of Mother Earth . . . symbolically rooted in her homeland" ("El retrato verbal" 81). Borrero's connection to her homeland is not metaphorical but *actual*, problematizing the concept of woman as landscape. Casal represents Borrero as an individual inhabiting a real place, Puentes Grandes, that is easily reachable by train. She is not her homeland; her homeland is the object of her own gaze and agency as a creative *subject*. The use of dialogue imbues the *crónica* with a collective function that belies the ivory tower: it is through contact with her public that Borrero will be "seen" as Casal sees her, a brilliant artist at work against the backdrop of the Cuban countryside.

Casal's *crónica* further magnifies Borrero's subjectivity through the overlooked tactic of ekphrasis, a common practice in *modernista* writing, exemplified by Casal's own series of sonnets, *Mi museo ideal*, which he based on the paintings of Gustave Moreau. As a literary trope, ekphrasis has come to be understood as the textual representation of a work of art, but Ruth Webb traces this modern definition to its ancient sources, where the concept refers to the vivid description of a subject matter that could include people, places, events, times and *topos*, "the manner in which something is done" (Theon, *Progymnasmata*, qtd. in Webb 11).¹¹ Casal's *crónica* is an example of the latter in that it focuses "not [on] a description of an *object* but of a *process*" (Webb 11, my emphasis). What Casal "brings before the eyes of his readers," first and foremost, is not a description of Juana's physical attributes, or even her artwork, but her creative practice (Ludlow 32). Centering the *activity* rather than the artwork amplifies Borrero's presence and agency as a creator. Casal's use of direct address heightens this particular function of ekphrasis within the *crónica* by engineering an encounter in which his readers might have witnessed Borrero painting in real life, not unlike the fictional meeting between Borrero and Casal imagined by Lezama Lima in "Paralelos." It matters to Casal that his readers *see* Borrero's painting for themselves, to be present with her *in situ* and to attest to her talent.

In the crucial scene, Casal stands on the riverbank and contemplates the young artist painting the Almendares *en plein air*. Borrero goes to work at first light against a backdrop of activity and industry: oxen pull their carts and farmers head to the field

¹¹ The association of ekphrasis with works of art began in 1867 with German archeologist Friedrich Matz (Webb 15). The term evolves "from a specific type of description, which may include works of art, to a description of any type which has a work of art as its subject-matter" (Webb 16).

singing while factories vomit smoke that mixes with the morning air (*Prosas* 265). This setting conveys that painting is a serious vocation for Borrero, who is not playing with the other children but instead spends the day devoted to her art: “En tales horas, podréis encontrar a la niña, con el pincel empuñado en la diestra y con la paleta asida en la izquierda, manchando una de sus telas, donde veréis embellecido algún rincón de aquel paisaje, iluminado por los rayos de oro de un sol de fuego y embalsamado por los aromas de lujuriosa vegetación” (*Prosas* 265). Casal represents Borrero painting outdoors rather than in a studio, a technique that associates her with the French Impressionist movement and reinforces her sister Dulce María Borrero’s intuition that Juana was ahead of her time: “la luminosidad tiende a asumir o desempeñar un papel protagónico o expresivo por encima de lo representado, lo que ha conducido a considerar que la artista se anticipó, entre nosotros, al impresionismo” (cited in Picart).

Nevertheless, readers have fixated on Casal’s reference to Borrero as *niña*, missing how the parallel between painting and other forms of productivity frames her art as a vocation that uplifts her homeland. Casal’s references to Borrero’s youth are neutral in comparison with the myriad descriptions that distort her image as an object of male fantasy catalogued by Eliana Rivero in “Pasión de Juana Borrero y la crítica” and also exemplified by Darío’s obituary (832).¹² In contrast, Casal’s words establish an explicit link between Borrero’s art and Cuban identity: “Así pasa los días de su infancia esta niña verdaderamente asombrosa, cuyo genio pictórico, a la vez que poético, promete ilustrar el nombre de la patria que la viera nacer” (*Prosa* 265–66). The luminosity that makes Borrero’s work an early example of Cuban Impressionism takes on an even deeper meaning here. Casal intuited in Borrero’s landscape painting an originality that would “illustrate the name of their homeland,” a radical declaration at a time when Cuban nationalism was dominated by white, Hispanic men (Vallejo, “Estrategias discursivas” 970). “Ilustrar,” as defined by the *Real Academia Española*, means both to light up (“dar luz al entendimiento”) and to lift up (“hacer ilustre a alguien o algo”), to elucidate the name of her homeland as well as to enlighten it. While it is true that this move exhibits Casal’s own critical acumen as a cultural tastemaker (Lugo-Ortiz, “Escritura” 391), creative agency does not rest exclusively with the male biographer here. Casal concludes his ekphrasis of Borrero’s creative process by presenting her as a foundational painter and poet on a national and international scale.

Reading Casal’s *crónica* through the lens of ekphrasis casts doubt on the interpretation that Casal was trying to keep Borrero in her place by infantilizing her *and* that he was an escapist, seeking to distance himself from his political reality. In fact, the *crónica* reflects an ambiguous ideology that is far less binary in its portrayal of the artist and the island, its testimonial value resting on Casal’s foundational and prescient vision of Borrero as an *agent* within Cuba’s national discourse. Casal’s sketch is an unconventional example of the genre insofar as it contains limited

¹² Two examples are Aniceto Valdivia, who describes Borrero as “la niña-musa y maga,” and Ángel Augier, who subtitles his essay about Borrero “la adolescente atormentada” (*La pasión* 3).

biographical details, and the main focus is not Borrero's appearance. While the biographical text affirms the subject's controlling gaze over an object, in *Getting the Picture*, Margaret Persin explains that the ekphrastic text "problematizes [their] relationship" by blurring the boundaries between "the creator and the created, . . . sender and receiver, . . . inside and outside, presence and absence, seeing and saying" (20). If on the one hand, the writer controls the representation of the artwork through language, on the other, he surrenders authority by "submit[ting] to the vision of another in his own text" (Persin 22). In this way, ekphrasis draws attention to the limits of the linguistic text, implicitly questioning its autonomy and authority (Persin 27), unsettling the subject-object relationship that underlies the biographical portrait genre for Lugo-Ortiz and Jiménez.

Likewise, the use of dialogue refracts the male biographer's gaze in order to represent multiple points of view including Borrero's, Casal's, the spectator's, and the reader's. Persin goes on to explain that ekphrasis is about seeing, and as such it requires engaging with the literary text on a more active level, "reading and interpreting the reading process of the writer, who in turn reads and interprets a visual text" (19). These layered interpretations take place simultaneously, not separately, so that the reader must negotiate "multiple frames of reference and discursive modes" in which both artists (Casal and Borrero), both artforms (writing and painting), and both places (Cuba and Europe) remain in view and in tension with one another (Persin 21, 28). In this way, *ekphrasis* also "makes spatial elements more salient" (Persin 15). For instance, Casal centers the river as the subject of Borrero's paintings as well as the local setting for her work where readers can see her painting in her outdoor "studio" on the riverbank of the Almendares at her home in Puentes Grandes, Cuba. Casal's description of Borrero's painting of the entry to her family's *casona* serves to highlight further her home-grown vision of the island: "Frente al murallón, serpentea un trozo del camino, sembrado de guijarros que chispean a la luz del sol. Tallos de plantas silvestres se siguen a trechos. Hacia la izquierda se extiende el río entre la yerba de sus orillas, como una banda de tela plateada que ciñera una túnica de terciopelo verde" (*Prosas* 270–71).

It is true that in describing the experience of watching Borrero paint, Casal evokes not only the Cuban river, but the German Rhine, a comparison that some critics have interpreted as an example of his will to escape: "Llegada la noche, el sitio se llega mágicamente a transformar. Más que al borde de un río del trópico, os creéis transportados a las orillas del Rhin" (*Prosa* 265). Fina García Marruz repeats the same well-known reproaches to Casal found in the work of Cintio Vitier, juxtaposing Casal's evasive temperament with José Martí's firmly rooted and more easily legible patriotism: "[L]a realidad le sugiere siempre una sustitución. Así ve transformada en taberna nórdica, pasada por el sueño de Huysmans, la cubanísima 'choza humeante a lo lejos'. No ha logrado esa identificación de vida y poesía de Martí" (qtd. in *La pasión* 268). According to Morán, Casal's error of substitution amounts to "a detour from the national text" anchored by Martí, and on this basis, García Marruz reinforces the antithesis between Casal and Cuba's national hero (*La pasión* 268).

Along similar lines, the Cuban scholar Duanel Díaz concludes that the description exemplifies a typical *Casalian* duality and even an "excision" of what is national and organic in favor of what is foreign and artificial. This surgical operation is

epitomized by Casal's juxtaposition of an "unfortunate Cuba" and "magnificent France" (n.p.). Díaz's reading would seem to corroborate Lugo-Ortiz's argument vis-à-vis "Juana Borrero," attributing to Casal "una contemplación que *transforma la realidad en otra cosa* funcionando como fuga de la realidad nacional" ("Escritura" 403, my emphasis).¹³ What these interpretations have in common is their misreading of juxtaposition as substitution, one image displaced and superseded by another, when in fact, Casal's ekphrastic description subverts this oppositional logic to reveal more nuanced ideas about place, and especially the symbolic meaning of the river.

Regarding the controversial reference to the Rhine, Casal's layered imagery in fact respects Borrero's own artistic vision. In a tribute to his fiancée, Carlos Pío Uhrbach¹⁴ establishes clearly Borrero's attraction to German landscapes: "Alemania la seducía y su imaginación se desencadenaba para volar, alondra, inspirada, a la Selva Negra, o rasgar con el filo jamás embotado de sus alas, los cendales neblinosos que envuelven al Rhin" (Uhrbach qtd. in Morán, *La pasión* 253). Discounting this detail in her critique, García Marruz's rhetorical maneuver shifts the focus from Borrero's own curiosity about German culture in order to suppress Casal's influence (*La pasión* 271). But evoking the Rhine need not be interpreted as an example of Casal's (or Borrero's) detachment from Cuban reality. On the contrary, it serves to frame Borrero as a great artist whose vision surpasses the "inferior and reiterative" landscape painting of the late nineteenth century in order to find a new voice and artistic expression (Lezama Lima, "Paralelos" 145–46).

The correspondence of the Almendares and the Rhine imbues the landscape with a richer meaning that is not divorced from Casal and Borrero's political reality. Alison Fraunhar explains that in late-nineteenth-century Cuba, maps and visual representations of the island often reinforced Spanish authority (57); in this context, Casal and Borrero's dialogue with German culture could be construed as an anti-colonial gesture. So too, Casal's admonishment of Borrero's critics ("los burgueses de las letras") and defense of the artist contests an insular mentality content to consume the dull, original output of hacks ("copleros") (*Prosas* 271, 264; Jiménez, "El retrato" 81). The river, brought to life through Borrero's painting and Casal's ekphrasis, is not a static symbol but a "tool for thinking" (McMillin 32) about the vicissitudes of their cultural and historical context, not unlike the sea, another fundamental icon in Cuban culture. The sea is a polyvalent symbol of movement

¹³ The insistence on Casal's uprootedness has had a ripple effect, so that his more complex meditations on identity, including "Juana Borrero," have been overshadowed. This tendency has its origins in judgments that Casal was "an exotic being" and "would always be a foreigner" in his own land (Darío, "Julián del Casal" 29). A subtler example of Casal's ostracism is José Enrique Varona's statement in his review of *Hojas al viento* (1891): "Julián del Casal tendría delante una brillante carrera de poeta; si no viviese en Cuba. Porque aquí se puede ser poeta, pero no vivir como poeta" (Casal, *Prosas* 29).

¹⁴ The poet, Carlos Pío Uhrbach (1872–1897), and his brother, Federico Uhrbach, formed part of the intellectual circle that coalesced around Casal. Juana Borrero's intimate correspondence with Carlos Pío gives access to her subjectivity, her views on art and poetry, and her friendship with Casal. See *La pasión del obstáculo*, pp. 111–97.

and constraint: the conduit that carries everyone away in Wendy Guerra's *Todos se van* (2006) yet keeps Nieve suspended, floating in space; the asphyxiating weight that hangs heavy over the island enclosed by water in Virgilio Piñera's "La isla en peso" (1943); the force that surrounds or consumes the young protagonists in the final scene of "Viva Cuba" (2005), by the Cuban writer and director Juan Carlos Cremata. However, the sea and the river whose waters eventually meet are not oppositional but complimentary forces.

The river, which is both culturally situated and free-flowing, signifies a nourishing and reciprocal movement between local and universal cultures offering an alternative to the binary thinking that underlies Duanel Díaz's interpretation of Casal's *crónica*. Contrary to establishing an "abyss between the province and place of culture, nature and artifice, reality and illusion, prose and poetry, country and city" (Díaz), Casal's superimpositions —artist and writer, painting and writing, Almendares and Rhine, Cuba and Europe— show how art spans the abyss between the two, allowing the spaces to flow together through the creative processes of painting and writing —and the acts of seeing and reading. Belkis Cuza Malé recognizes as much when she claims that "[e]sta realidad, devenida paisaje 'extranjero,' no se aminora ni envilece con la superposición de láminas, sino que se enriquece en su disloque" (15–16). For Cuza Malé, the play of contrasts sharpens both the tropical *and* German landscapes without one superseding the other: "Ver como vio Casal, es mérito de poeta. Gracias a él, nos llega esa imagen poderosa que nos sumerge en hondas melancolías, que nos hace más nítidos, por contrastantes, el verde tropical y los colores del Rhin, la choza humilde y la taberna bulliciosa" (15–16, my emphasis). Casal points the way toward self-actualization, not by imitating or escaping into a superior culture but by heralding Cuba's future as it is embodied by the young Borrero. Indeed, in its positioning of Borrero as a national artist, Casal's *crónica* affirms Cuba's cultural capital and position in the global, intellectual community making this a less insular but no less patriotic representation of the river.

Borrero and Casal's visual and textual representations of their homeland reverberate with the concept of Cuba as a "moveable nation" (O'Reilly Herrera 241). At a time when the nation was conceptualized as a territorial and fixed entity, Casal and Borrero's vision of the Almendares anticipates Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's insight that "the way to locate Cuba is not simply by fixing one's gaze on the island" (252). In Casal's *crónica*, national affiliation is not diluted but enriched through cultural engagement and exchange, a lesson that can shed light on the present day. To be sure, reflecting on Cuban identity on the island and in the diaspora, Jorge Duany has called for a "move away from the customary distinction between nation and emigration, where the former category is firmly rooted in a fixed territory with a stable core of culture and the latter is uprooted from its ancestral origins with a displaced sense of self" ("Reconstructing" 19). Against a telluric discourse of identity, Duany proposes an "aesthetic of traveling cultures, border crossings and nomad identities to redraw the symbolic boundaries between Cubanness" ("Reconstructing" 19).

In a similar vein, Casal's *crónica* illustrates the salubrious function of artistic and literary activity through the continuous energy and mobility of water, proposing an expansive concept of what it means to be Cuban nourished by cultural contact

and the vitality of art. Put another way, Casal's ekphrasis of Borrero's creative process stimulates a poetics of place that is not about what you can lose by looking outward, but what you can *learn*. The very nature of rivers that flow into the sea and whose waters eventually meet reinforces Borrero's resonance and universality, while Casal's prediction that her vision "prometen ilustrar el nombre de la patria que la viera nacer" establishes a patriotic desire, not to transfigure the Cuban space but to reveal its true nature (*Prosa* 265). At a time when waves of settlers, including artists, "brought European ways of seeing and being to the island" (Fraunhar 57), Casal's *crónica* establishes an explicit link between Borrero's art and Cuban identity: Borrero's painting represents a local vantage, drawing attention to *Cuban* ways of seeing the landscape and its people.

Through ekphrasis, Casal stimulates the relationships among art and nature, artist and place, meaning and movement, inspiring Lezama's own reflections on art and identity in "Paralelos: La pintura y la poesía en Cuba." As Antonio José Ponte recalls in *El libro perdido de los origenistas*, Lezama was preoccupied with the lost meaning of an essential Cubanness (21). Lezama concludes his inventory of absent cultural relics by once again bringing Casal and Borrero together: "Sabemos que Julián del Casal hizo aprendizaje y algunos intentos de pintar, nadie ha visto una de sus telas de aficionado; en el Museo no hay un solo cuadro de Juana Borrero, sus *Negritos* son para mí la única pintura genial del siglo XIX nuestro. Todo lo hemos perdido, desconocemos qué es lo esencial cubano" ("Paralelos" 132).¹⁵ Later ruminating on a page torn from José Martí's last diary, Lezama imagines in its place Borrero's *Pilluelos* (which he called *Negritos*), effectively inserting her artistic vision into Cuba's foundational narrative: "Hay una página arrancada. Me detengo absorto ante ese vacío. Pero mi perplejo se puebla, allí están, uno tras otro, los tres negritos de Juana Borrero. La página arrancada ha servido de fondo a la sonrisa acumulativa e indescifrable del cubano" ("Paralelos" 153). Casal's hypothetical paintings and Borrero's ignored masterpiece, like the missing page of Martí's foundational text, constitute a "national episode" that for Ponte signifies the fatality of Cuba's trajectory (*El libro* 27). But the manifestation of Borrero's painting is also a tactic for repairing these absences. It is significant that *Pilluelos* materializes twice in Lezama's essay, connecting Borrero to Martí and Casal.¹⁶ These parallels affirm Borrero's and Casal's foundational roles in Cuba's *becoming* (alongside Martí) and consecrate *Pilluelos* as a signifier of Cuban cultural and national identity. Ponte aptly describes Lezama's "revision" as a palimpsest (*El libro* 27), "something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of

¹⁵ At the time that Lezama Lima wrote "Paralelos," Juana Borrero's work had not yet been exhibited in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba. Her painting was donated by the family to the permanent collection, *Arte en la colonia* in 1984 (Campistrous). Also included in the exhibit are works by the Spanish painter, Víctor Patricio Landaluze. According to art historian, Juan Martínez, Borrero and Landaluze are among the few artists to depict Afro-Cubans in painting during the nineteenth century. On opposite sides of the independence war, their representation of Afro-Cubans also differed, meriting further study.

¹⁶ Ottmar Ette explores the relationship between Borrero and Martí in "Gender Trouble." Ette argues that Borrero responds to the male objectification of the female subject underlying Martí's concept of modernity by projecting a passive and silent identity onto men, epitomized by her poem "Apolo" (85, 93).

its earlier form” (“Palimpsest”). Juana Borrero’s painting does not obscure Martí’s diary; on the contrary, placed alongside one another, artwork and text mutually enrich one another’s meaning (Lutz 49).

Stimulated by these encounters, I have argued that Casal’s “Juana Borrero” is the formative text of an alternative national conscience. In the *crónica*, Casal re-creates the experience of watching Borrero paint the Almendares River, representing the cultural spaces of Cuba and Europe through their “juxtaposition and simultaneity” (Persin 15, 28). It is not a coincidence that in Lezama’s “Paralelos,” the wisdom accumulated through creative acts that make and remake history, is embodied by “the continuous mutations” that lie beneath the unchanging surface of rivers: “ese caudal del río es la riqueza que opera en la sabiduría” (“Paralelos” 152). Writing during the fraught decades of Cuba’s long independence struggle, Casal envisions in Borrero’s landscapes a riparian and expansive concept of identity with fluid boundaries, anticipating by three quarters of a century, Lezama’s insight that Borrero’s art intuited an essential Cubanness. These evident parallels establish Lezama’s debt to Casal and also Casal’s debt to Borrero, inviting us to reconsider the enduring significance and transformative power of her art.

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