

Black Femininity and the Silence of Domestic Space in “The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation” by José del Carmen Díaz

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To Kiziah, also known as
Kizzie or Old Nancy Pride
My earliest known black ancestor

Introduction

Critics have scarcely researched nineteenth-century Afro-Cuban writers, with the exception of Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (also known by the pseudonym Plácido). Among the other poets, playwrights, journalists and storytellers whose names we know, the work of José del Carmen Díaz, an obscure enslaved poet from Güines emerges. In the fifth edition of *Poetas de color* (1887), Francisco Calcagno includes a biographical and literary sketch of José del Carmen Díaz. Although the book is primarily concerned with Manzano and Plácido –whose work Calcagno discusses at length– some attention is paid to lesser-known black poets.¹ In a similar way as Manzano some forty-three years prior, José del Carmen Díaz procured his freedom at the hands of Cuban abolitionists who sold *Poetas de color* (1879) to finance his legal manumission (Calcagno 87). Calcagno’s project, however, was not the only effort under way to buy Carmen Díaz’s freedom. For instance, Juan Gualberto Gómez –a prominent journalist, abolitionist and pro-independence thinker– was among more than ten other members of the black Cuban press that also made contributions to secure the emancipation of José del Carmen Díaz (Calcagno 87-88).² Carmen Díaz’s manumission did not rely exclusively on a white abolitionist impulse; instead it represented a bipartisan project and was emblematic of a late nineteenth century accord between Cuban abolitionists of African and European descent (Deschamps Chapeaux 54).³

In 1879, Calcagno published a collection of Carmen Díaz’s poems entitled, *Los cantos del esclavo* (Songs of A Slave) as an addendum to the third edition of *Poetas de color*.

⁴ The publication of Carmen Díaz’s poetry nearly coincided with the Treaty of Zanjón (1878), which ended the Ten Years War but failed to abolish slavery throughout the island and achieve Cuban independence from Spain (Helg 56).⁵ José del Carmen Díaz’s fame extended far beyond Güines given that his poems also appeared in important black newspapers of the period: *La Fraternidad* and *La Armonía de Matanzas* founded by Juan Gualberto Gómez and Rafael Gregorio Gómez respectively (Deschamps Chapeaux 24, 54, Fraga León 38).⁶

In recent years, provincial Cuban researchers have undertaken projects to rescue the historical memory and literary presence of nineteenth-century poets of African ancestry. *Un poeta esclavo en Puerto Príncipe* (2005) by Saulo A. Fernández Núñez and *Poetas esclavos en Cuba: el trinitario Ambrosio Echemendía* (2008) by Yansert Fraga León, represent a growing interest in the rediscovery and study of black colonial writers

by contemporary Cuban critics. Fraga León's book explores the life and works of five enslaved nineteenth century Cuban poets; among these is José del Carmen Díaz.⁷ Both projects are expository works dealing with the poets' biographies and literary productions. Although the critical contributions are limited in scope, they effectively uncover the literature of African descended poets who had otherwise been condemned to oblivion.

It is not what we know about the poet from Güines that is remarkable but what we have yet to uncover. Scholars have yet to unearth the year in which José del Carmen Díaz was born or discover when he died. We know almost nothing of his family life or who his parents were. Our most daunting challenge, perhaps, is that our knowledge of the poet has been gleaned from merely four sources: *Poetas de color* by Francisco Calcagno, *El negro en el periodismo cubano del siglo XIX* by Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, "Bibliografía de autores de la raza de color de Cuba" by Carlos M. Trelles and, of course, Carmen Díaz's small book of poetry, *Los cantos del esclavo*.⁸ Moreover, colonial era newspapers containing what remains of nineteenth black Cuban poetry are generally in such decrepit condition that scholars are not permitted to consult them. To date, these challenges of conducting archival research in Havana and Camagüey have rendered my research inconclusive.⁹

Consequently, critics must rely on national and regional histories and even read the literary text as *an imperfect document* of sorts to reconstruct the ever vanishing-past of an enslaved black Cuban literatus. In that vein, the title of the piece I am analyzing, "El cementerio del ingenio" (The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation) reveals the conditions under which José del Carmen Díaz labored in the sugar-producing town of Güines. Calcagno reveals that the poet was an autodidact who read newspapers and transmitted what he learned to his enslaved compatriots. The plantation owner penalized José del Carmen's insurgent literacy practices by compelling him to work in the sugarcane fields (87). I infer that like Juan Francisco Manzano before him, the poet from Güines was an enslaved domestic servant whose presence in the big house provided him access to printed material and made him privy to elite conversation and debate.

Prior to the advent of sugar-cane production, Güines was already an immensely wealthy region with an economy based on cattle ranching, tobacco farming and the logging of precious woods (Abad Mora & González 352-353). Like other regions in nineteenth century Cuba, Güines profited from the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), which abolished slavery, brought about a drastic reduction in sugar production (Landers 206) and founded a black political state (Rolph-Trouillot 37). The scorched earth tactics that African and black creole revolutionaries employed provoked the collapse of French sugar production and an overall decline in world sugar output even as demand increased. All at once Cubans were well positioned to take advantage of a sharp down turn in sugar production, rising sugar prices, and growing North American and European market demand (Pérez 71).

In the mid-eighteenth century, the sugar planters' quest for arable land (that had not been exhausted by excessive exploitation) motivated the construction of large plantations in the outlying regions of the capital city towards the lush Güines Valley. These large estates supplanted tobacco farming and transformed Güines into a major sugar-producing hub for the Havana elite (Bergad 13). In 1837, the emergent economic power of the region motivated the construction of a railroad system connecting Güines to

Havana (Abad Mora & González 352). Towards the mid-nineteenth century there were some 15, 885 enslaved persons laboring in the rural outskirts of Güines. According to historian Franklin Knight, Güines, Cienfuegos, Matanzas, and Santiago de Cuba, were among the nine largest provinces in terms of slave population (135).

José del Carmen Díaz's poem, "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" consists of nine heartrending vignettes about seven persons that lived and died under the yoke of slavery in western Cuba.¹⁰ No other poem so descriptive of the lives of enslaved persons on the island has ever surfaced. In fact, this poem has been virtually unknown to Cuban and U.S. literary critics alike for 134 years. Furthermore, the text portrays a gendered story of slavery in light of the fact that three of the seven characters are women. The poem is written in the popular Spanish form known as the *décima*. Cuban scholar Jesús Orta Ruiz characterizes the *décima* as a popular genre that the Catholic Church utilized in the nineteenth century in an effort to proselytize blacks and whites alike (27-28).¹¹ I am interested in Carmen Díaz's choice of literary genre to represent enslaved Cuban women because stories told in *décimas* were generally improvised and thus, may have been transmitted orally first. In this way, José del Carmen Díaz's poem can be read as oral history that serves as a site for 'counter memory' (Sharpe xxv).

In *The Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*, Jenny Sharpe calls into question the oft-used paradigm of resistance that would classify quotidian acts of survival as "self-determination" or "self-making". Sharpe draws on the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs to rename the tactics and behaviors that Afro-Caribbean women adopted during the era of racialized slavery. She cites Jacobs' notion of "something akin to freedom" as an example of the black concubine's negotiated agency (xxv-xxvi).¹² I consider Sharpe's emphasis on tactics appropriate for the purposes of this article because the enslavement of Afro-Caribbean women in domestic space more readily lent itself to negotiation with power instead of direct confrontation with it.

This article is part of a broader project of literary and historical recovery, akin to what Toni Morrison has termed "a kind of literary archaeology" (Morrison qtd. in Sharpe xi). My project aims to suture the multiple fragments of a silenced past symptomatic of diasporic narratives about black women whose presence in the text was either subordinated to male protagonists or silenced altogether. Silence is not merely the absence of language but the willful omission of discourse and the choice to leave *certain* stories untold. To be sure, the creation of silences is a trope of nineteenth century black Cuban literature with notable examples in Manzano's unpublished poem, "La esclava ausente" (The Absent Slave Woman) (1823) and "El diablito" (The Little Devil), Plácido's piece about African-based carnivalesque ritual that posits slave rebellion as a means to liberation.¹³ In this brief article, I analyze José del Carmen Díaz's poem, "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" as counter-memory that seeks to put to rest the *troubled past* of enslaved black women. My research is guided by the following questions: Can the self-dissembling text bring resolution and, in due course, can it heal memories that have yet to be spoken? If Carmen Díaz's self-referential narrative poem is read as an act of catharsis, might the silences preclude the healing process?

Without exception, the women portrayed in "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" are condemned to the domestic sphere where they do housework for elite white women and are subjected to the sexual advances of their white slaveholders. Carmen Díaz's characters reside in a liminal space between submission and subjectivity,

indoctrination and disobedience. If the reader considers that the poet's mother was also an enslaved domestic servant then the use of ellipsis to obfuscate certain truths comes into sharp relief. José del Carmen Díaz is charged with a perilous task; by choosing to remember he is also obliged to forget. Unlike the male characters in his poem that died violent deaths as they vied for self-determination, the women go quietly into the night finding repose in death alone. The literary record obscures the violence committed against them and even their quotidian acts of defiance are difficult to read. In this paper, I analyze the *décimas* as epitaphs that evoke a sorrowful past and memorialize persons who have been discarded by a racialized economic system no longer able to exploit their labor output. It is not labor yields, however, but the iniquity of white male desire and the defiled image of black femininity that interests me here. I read Carmen Díaz's epitaphs' as figurative inscriptions on imagined gravestones in defense of black femininity that both commemorate and silence the past of three enslaved black house servants: Dorotea, Lucia and mother. I believe that the deliberate silence of José del Carmen Díaz is indicative of the ethics of black masculinity, which require that men defend the reputation of their mothers and consecrate their memory. Observing silences and speaking when the text does not, I make use of Juan Francisco Manzano and Mary Prince's Caribbean slave narratives –published in 1840 and in 1831 respectively– to contextualize and breach fissures within an otherwise disjointed account.

Willful Silence: Black Women in Domestic Space

“The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation” is a self-referential jeremiad written from within an enslaved community that suffered untold violence and found itself in existential crisis. For example, the characters may portray individuals the poet once knew or be an allegorical construct to represent the lives of enslaved persons. Since Carmen Díaz portrays himself and his mother in the poem, I regard the text as self-referential writing. The cemetery is represented as a rustic place within a pine grove beyond the slave huts where sorrowful verses are sung. Neglected, abandoned and nearly devoid of personal adornment, the plantation cemetery is where the miserable remains of enslaved people have been interred. In what follows, Carmen Díaz describes the space thus:

Do you see the pine groves
beyond the slave huts where the *Jews* sing
melancholic songs?
over there you catch sight of heaps of dirt
with grave appearance,
treeless, without mystery
with no crosses, without flowers, nothing:
come, this is the lowly cemetery
of the blacks. (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 113)¹⁴

José del Carmen Díaz favors a rhetorical strategy that gestures towards multiple interlocutors: black and white abolitionists who procured his freedom as well as members of the plantation community whose knowledge of the vicissitudes of slavery were inscribed on the body.¹⁵ Inviting his interlocutor to the cemetery, the poet anticipates reader reception and, in turn, appeals to the reader/listener to remember the most reviled entities of colonial society: the interred bodies of the enslaved. Remarkably, the Latin cross is absent from José del Carmen Díaz's portrayal of the cemetery on the sugar

plantation. However, another important ethnohistoric source from late nineteenth century Cuba confirms that slave cemeteries were adorned with Christian crosses. Miguel Barnet's famous narrative, *Cimarrón: historia de un esclavo* about the life of ex-slave Esteban Montejo who escaped the plantation, lived as a maroon in the mountains of Las Villas and later enlisted as a foot soldier in the Cuban War for Independence (1895-1898) provides cultural context for my reading of the poem. Montejo's testimony describes the slave cemetery in Sagua la Grande as a coarse, unembellished space where the cadavers of deceased persons were hurled into holes in the ground (Barnet 45).¹⁶ But, while Carmen Díaz's reference to spirituality is coded in esoteric discourse, Montejo clarifies the matter straightforwardly, explaining that graves on the sugar plantation were ornamented with simple wooden crosses, a crucifix of sorts. Montejo characterizes the cemetery on the sugar plantation as a space imbued with malevolent spiritual presence inclined to do harm to the living and the cross as a protection against spiritual enemies that keeps evil spirits at bay (Barnet 100). Montejo's testimony has numerous implications for the further study of this poem. For my purposes, however, I interpret the absence of Christian relics in Carmen Díaz's story about Güines as a means of denying enslaved persons normative religious privilege.

Carmen Díaz repudiates the notion of black slave anonymity through the portrayal of individual histories of otherwise forgotten persons. In nineteenth-century Cuba, the term *negrada* indeterminately referred to black plantation masses and popular representations of blacks often constituted a homogenous Other, an automaton lacking personal traits and human characteristics. For example, with few exceptions, there are no headstones to differentiate one tomb from another and from the standpoint of Catholicism the absence of the Roman Cross leaves the safe passage of the soul from this world to the other in doubt. The poet positions himself as a custodian of the graves of those who have been exploited for wealth production and disposed of as social refuse.¹⁷

José del Carmen Díaz's female characters embody an array of gender roles consigned black women on the slave plantation: Dolores, the beautiful concubine, Lucia, the handmaiden who strives to achieve romantic love and the everpresent black maternal figure. In all three instances, the poet uses ellipsis to dissemble and occlude key aspects of his characters' lives. Dolores represents the enslaved African descended woman whose value as white property does not reside in her capacity to work but rather in her desirability and in the life giving force of her body. Below, I have cited the stanza in its entirety to illustrate this point:

Beyond the brilliant sun,
 another tomb shines
 with a simple gravestone:
 it's the last resting place of Dolores.
 But why does that tomb
 have a gravestone and flowers?
 It's that Dolores was a beautiful woman
 and the master..... But it's a mystery
 why he rests in the same cemetery
 where she also lies. (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 4)¹⁸

The African descended male gaze orders the rhythm of storytelling so that the reader feels a sense of compassion for the female characters. Dolores' name (meaning pain or suffering in Spanish) is emblematic of her condition as a personal possession of the white

male owner. José del Carmen Díaz begins with a pithy description of the tomb. Unlike most other persons buried in the slave cemetery, Dolores' sepulcher is not defined by absence but by the presence of a simple, yet glistening headstone. The poet uses the image of a brilliant sun to differentiate Dolores from two previously cited male personages: Juan Congo and the black man Eugenio; the former is forgotten in death and the defiance of the latter resulted in his violent demise.

The presence of a small shiny tombstone is indicative of the female character's importance to the white slaveholder given that no other character's grave—either male or female—is so adorned. Dolores is not merely another black woman she is set apart, distinctive, since her beautiful countenance and physical appeal correspond to a certain aesthetic. The writer draws attention to the gently adorned tomb of Dolores posing a rhetorical question: “But why does that tomb / have a gravestone and flowers?” (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno 4). Carmen Díaz's rhetorical strategy is coherent throughout the poem. The elegy evokes a somber, melancholic tone as the poet guides his wary readers through vacuous, labyrinthine spaces where they might encounter the dead. Ellipsis creates a nuanced pause within the text, draws attention to silence and obliges the reader to reflect on the unspoken horrors of plantation slavery. For Carmen Díaz, silence is not a negation but an avowal of female suffering; the nature of said affliction is unspoken so that the reader must construct meanings of her/his own.

The poet's rejoinder makes use of ambiguity to insinuate the true nature of their relationship: “It's that Dolores was a beautiful woman / and the master... But it's a mystery” (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 4). As the poetic “I” intimates, it is a *mystery* that the owner lies under tomb in the same grave as his female servant, Dolores, since the burial practice in question is generally reserved for husband and wife. As Jenny Sharpe observes, “housekeeper” and “secondary wife” were euphemisms for concubine in the Anglophone Caribbean (57). The poet's choice of language implies that Dolores was subjected to such a social arrangement because the apparent sexual union of the enslaved black woman and the white male owner is the subtext of these otherwise opaque stanzas. The narrative gestures towards the strangeness of this burial practice and insinuates sexual impropriety without ruling out the possibility of rape. As Mary Louise Pratt has noted in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, interracial love stories reproduced European male fantasies wherein romantic love replaced coercion and guaranteed the willful submission of colonized women. In this regard, the master/slave love narrative feigns reciprocity to convey a story of requited love (97) and heterosexual union that would efface the historical record of sexual exploitation and rampant abuse. Concubinage was yet another form of subjection accentuating that enslaved Afro-Caribbean women were the possessions of white men (97).

Pratt's contention is pertinent to my analysis of Carmen Díaz's poem because in counterdistinction with urban areas where free women of African lineage cohabitated with white men, in the rural Caribbean, concubines were drawn from among enslaved female populations (Sharpe 45). I identify Dolores as an enslaved female concubine of an anonymous master and Lucia as a *criada de mano* (handmaiden) whose removal from the big house implies that her owner sought to castigate her for an offense either real or imagined.

More than any other stanza in the poem, the *décima* describing the brief life of Lucia is an object lesson in selective narrative technique.

Further down the way..... Lucia poor thing!
 a handmaid she was,
 she loved, she sinned, she was light-hearted;
 and her master sent her to the sugar fields.
 Imagine what she would suffer
 from such an odious measure!
 her strength was too modest
 or such a bitter life;
 she could not endure the burden,
 and..... as you see..... here she lies. (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 5)¹⁹

Employing a succinct staccato style, the poet describes Lucia's behavior thusly: “she loved, she sinned, she was light-hearted” (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 5). The poet’s cadence implies that Lucia possessed a sort of gaiety that countered the exploitative purposes of the Cuban plantation system. Once more, the female character is consigned to the domestic sphere where she performs household duties: cooking, cleaning, raising the owner’s children and nursing the sick. As Sharpe observes, such work was gendered female and often relegated to mulatto concubines who were also coerced into being “secondary wives” (57-58). The owner’s wife (presumably a white woman) is the only missing character, not only has the text rendered her silent –like the white male plantation owner– but her presence is entirely unaccounted for. The white woman is figuratively dislodged from her lawful place in the big house to be replaced by the more desirable handmaiden, Lucia. Domesticity enclosed black women within intimate spaces where they cared and provided for the very men that owned and exploited their bodies. Such a perverse social arrangement exacted a physical and psychological price on black women even as it denied them the imagined protections of patriarchy, i.e. legitimate marriage, honor, and financial stability.

But several questions remain. Who did Lucia love? How did she *sin* and against whom? The first three verses can be construed to signify different things. Perhaps, Lucia was an undutiful handmaiden whose passive resistance made her an unprofitable possession. In such a scenario, her owner’s mandate that she labor from sun up to sun down in the sugarcane fields could be explained by the profit motive. Another possible interpretation is that Lucia –who prepared the master’s meals– was perceived to be disloyal and thus, a danger to his wellbeing. Perhaps, Lucia might even the score by poisoning the slaveholder. I am, however, disinclined to accept these readings, since the third verse: “she loved, she sinned, she was light-hearted” privileges the verb *loved* conjugated in the preterit to suggest finality and immutability. I believe that Lucia’s gaiety or boldness, if you will, pertained to her choice of a black lover, and possibly to sexual exploits that landed her in trouble with the white male that legally possessed her. José del Carmen Díaz 's description of black female characters is marked by yet another silence: the absence of the black male as a romantic companion.

Spanish jurisprudence fomented the legal union of African descended men and women in order to make the sexual reproduction of the enslaved population feasible (Castañeda Fuentes, Rubiera and Martiatu ed. 18).²⁰ Martial unions did not require the masters’ consent as long as married people continued to serve. Although Spanish slave codes prohibited the separation of husband and wife, this did not prevent masters from

severing the ties between married persons nor did it guard unmarried women's children from being sold to other estates (Midlo Hall 93-95).

If Lucia epitomizes the enslaved domestic servant that passionately sought a husband of her own, than the owner's disapproval is an obfuscation of his desire. In other words, there is not a profit motive but a sexual one. To borrow a phrase from Carmen Díaz, "its a mystery". The narrative does not assign blame for Lucia's hasty demise instead the poet protects her memory (and perhaps himself) by explaining that "her strength was too modest" to work in the sugar cane fields (Calcagno ed. 4). I suspect that wealth production is implausible grounds for Lucia's chastisement and that the reader cannot be sure of her cause of death. I would like to briefly comment on Manzano's Cuban anti-slavery poem and Mary Prince's narrative about slavery in the Anglophone Caribbean since both preceded the 1879 publication of "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" and illustrated the plantation system's violent reaction to black female autonomy either expressed through desire or in talking back.²¹

"The Absent Slave Woman" (1823) was not published in Manzano's lifetime and was entirely unknown (and virtually unavailable) to readers for more than one hundred and seventy years after it was written. However, in 1994, leading Cuba scholar William Luis introduced Manzano's antislavery poetry to the scholarly public in a groundbreaking article, "Nicolás Azcárate's Antislavery Notebook and the Unpublished Poems of the Slave Juan Francisco Manzano".²² Luis reads the poem as a contest of wills in which the enslaved woman refuses her subaltern status, sees herself as her master's equal, and lays claim to the ideals inherent in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* ("Azcárate's Anti-Slavery Notebook" 337). In Luis' view, Manzano may have adopted the female perspective to dramatize the inequalities of the master/slave relationship much in the way that writers in the Delmonte group would do in subsequent years ("Azcárate's Anti-Slavery Notebook" 339).

While it is not my intention to do a close reading of the poem –which will require a lengthy analysis of its own– I want to draw attention to common thematics and rhetorical devices in Manzano and José del Carmen Díaz's respective pieces. Both writers imagine the enslaved Afro-Caribbean woman in direct conflict with her white male owner but are circumspect with regards to the nature of the quarrel. In my view, "The Absent Slave Woman" and "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" are not only significant for their portrayal of enslaved women but also for what they refuse to say about the multiple vulnerabilities of the black female in domestic space. The female poetic "I" in "The Absent Slave Woman" entreats her master not to tear her away her from her lover/companion of ten years: "What is it worth to separate two refined souls? / If they possess the intent to love [each other]". The woman chastises the master as a "Hard, inhuman possessor" that condemns her to a miserable fate when her only *sin* is to resist his authority so that she might "love tenderly" (Manzano, Luis ed. 170-172).

The female protagonist compares her love –presumably for a black male– to the sowing and the growth of a small oak tree, although vulnerable at first after several years it becomes nearly impossible to uproot. The oak tree is metaphorical double entendre: "But if it stands upright, it hardens, and grows branches, and shoots; [...] Vigorously it resists all violence. / So is the flame of love in my heart / Its passion swells, and it penetrates ever part of me" (Manzano, Luis ed. 173). The little oak tree is a metaphor for the constancy of requited love. Ironically, the metaphor is unstable because the hardening

of the tree suggests disparate realities: it is a symbol for the erect penis of the slave master and an analogy for the black woman's resistance to rape, which is appropriately coded as "all violence". Both poems –published during different periods of Cuban slavery, 1823 and 1879 respectively– are immersed within a culture of silence regarding the rape of women in slave narratives.²³ In both cases, male writers speak for African descended women but in "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" those women are deceased and the poet's words are mere epitaphs in hopes of honorably preserving their memory. The story of Mary Prince, however, carves out discursive space for the black female person.

The narrative of Mary Prince is one of displacement and purchase comingled with bereavement and an unrelenting sense of vulnerability to the prospect of bodily harm.²⁴ Mary Prince's relation of her life story was the first female slave narrative. Published in London in 1831, this as-told-to-slave narrative was a clear denunciation from a female perspective (Introduction, Gates ed. 9). Prince's account is a gendered intervention into an otherwise masculine genre where she conveys the slave owners' brutal reaction to the palpable suffering of black female persons. Her critique of hegemonic white masculinity is as vivid as it is convincing. The narrator relates that her male owner subjected her to torture by binding her body to a ladder so that he might give her one hundred lashes with his own hands (Prince, Gates ed. 264). When read in juxtaposition to José del Carmen Díaz's poem, the story of Mary Prince illustrates Lucia's vulnerability to physical chastisement, emotional abuse and her master's power to sell her away from her family at the slightest whim. Prince remarks, "but slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the blacks" and again, "Of those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves" (Gates ed. 258).

In Dolores' case the pause embedded within the text silences the sexual nature of concubinal relationships that such women endured from the plantation owner who is shrouded in anonymity. In fact, the white owner is the only unnamed male character in the entire composition. Although he appears twice, there is no epitaph devoted to his memory so that he is not portrayed as an individual but in relation to his human chattels. The plantation owner is bereft of personal characteristics, and in a sense, he is relegated to silence by death and by the stroke of Carmen Díaz's pen. He is an illegitimate husband and an usurper who violently forced his way inside.

The eviction of house servants from the colonial estate to labor in the fields is a common trope in slave plantation literature. The big house/field binary bespeaks a division of labor, perceived phenotypical and color differences as well as some cultural distinctions.²⁵ By writing about these two female characters, in some ways the author is reminded of himself since he was sent to work in the sugar cane fields as reprimand for reading and writing. The poet suggests that Lucia's demise is the result of being made to work sun up and sundown in the sugar cane fields, which physically destroyed her delicate composition and embittered her existence. Lucia's untimely death was symptomatic of a larger problem: the dreadfully short life expectancy for enslaved men and women. The survival of enslaved Africans and their offspring was greatly imperiled by the number of hours they were made to work, the little rest they received, harsh physical abuse and exceptionally high infant mortality rates (Midlo Hall 13). In fact, historian Louis Pérez Jr. has shown that enslaved plantation laborers survived for an average of seven years from the time of arrival. The problem was so severe that the death

rate of enslaved people exceeded the child birth rate (98). The horrid rate of infant mortality bespeaks the maltreatment, undernourishment and rampant physical abuse of expectant women on slave plantations who were required to work in the fields until two months of the gestation period (Fraginals 18). In her groundbreaking essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, prominent cultural theorist Hortense Spillers explains that U.S. slave society denied females of African descent “the parental function” because maternity was not a “legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance” for enslaved communities. When captive women gave birth, in effect, they replicated the labor instruments of the slave system without reproducing their right to mothering (77-78, 80). In what follows, I examine the relationship between silence and grief in José del Carmen Díaz’s representation of his mother’s grave on the sugar plantation.

In Search of the Black Matriarch

The poet writes more about his mother’s tomb than he does concerning her years on the sugar plantation. Below, I cite the penultimate stanza in its entirety to illustrate my observation:

Do you see that mound of dirt
covered with wildflowers,
gloomy yellow flowers
known as *flowers for the departed*?
I sow them, shedding on them abundant tears.....
Leave me to weep piously
in incessant bitterness:
Only in this sepulcher
did my mother find repose! (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 5)²⁶

The penultimate stanza is a dutiful and affectionate lament in reminiscence of the poet’s mother. Although her name is unspoken, she is memorialized for the role she played in the life of her son. The wildflowers are a symbol of the poet as custodian of the grave. More than any other, this stanza is marked by a profound sense of grief as the poet weeps bitterly in pious memory of the fallen.

The stanza devoted to the poet’s mother constitutes a climactic moment within the narrative wherein José del Carmen Díaz –presumably accompanied by the reader– insists that he be left to grieve alone. The elegy leads to a profound moment of personal anguish, sorrow and remembrance. Of the three women represented, the poetic “I” moans and wails for one alone: his mother. The silences are magnified in this stanza because so little is said about the mother of the poet. In my estimation, the silence of the text is not a negation of maltreatment but corresponds to a black masculine imperative to protect, defend, and honor mother. The ellipsis so often used in this poem –and especially with regard to the representation of women– only appears in relation to the poet’s mournful cry. In contrast to the other *décimas*, the plantation owner is notably absent from this particular scene of bereavement. Tears bespeak deeply rooted pain and dissemble stories untold of exploitation and abuse, resistance and silence.

In this regard, Juan Francisco Manzano’s account of his mother’s death is analogous to the poet from Güines. Manzano relates a story of sorrow comingled with a

solemn sense of duty regarding the appropriate liturgical devices and rituals necessary for his mother's safe passage to the otherworld. Manzano describes the cruelty of the Marchioness Prado de Ameno, his second mistress, who sought to dominate him physically and torture him psychologically by engendering an unremitting sense of chaos in his life. Upon his mother's death, Manzano's mistress gave him a mere three pesos to pay for a San Gregorio Mass. Instead, he chose to sell a personal item to compensate the priest so that additional masses might be held in honor of his recently deceased mother, María de Pilar (Luis ed. 331, 333). As William Luis has said, the black poetic "I" in "The Absent Slave Woman" is a metaphorical representation of African cultural origins and traditions ("Azcarate's Anti-Slavery Notebook" 338). The same could be said about Manzano's representation of his mother who is the first character portrayed in his slave narrative and lends order to an otherwise discontinuous story (Luis ed. 299). Such a reading is also pertinent to my analysis of José del Carmen Díaz since the mother is an archetype, emblematic of the cultural, religious and social origins of the black family. The poet's mother symbolizes the caretaking, love and compassion that mends and binds the familial unit. In these Afro-Cuban colonial texts, the physical departure of the maternal figure is especially tragic since there may be no one who can reproduce the critical gender roles she performed.

Carmen Díaz's aesthetic choice to locate his mother as the last person portrayed in the narrative poem, suggests the closing of the life cycle. The lyrical positioning of the black maternal figure is emblematic of the poet's search for emotional (and spiritual) closure. The poet's lament bespeaks not only the loss of his mother but also intimates a familial bond that transcended the plantation imperative to turn personality into property (Spillers 78). Among the myriad things that Carmen Díaz's poem achieves, perhaps the most important is the representation of the humanity of enslaved persons otherwise condemned to historical erasure. Spillers concludes her essay with poignant insight concerning the sheer magnitude of the mother in African American cultural history. For Spillers, the black male is obliged to regain the mother as a component of his own personhood given that legal enslavement removed the black male from his symbolic and real position as father (80). Although written for a different cultural context, Spillers' commentary is relevant for my reading of the "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation". Carmen Díaz's poem is silent on the matter of paternity, saying nothing of his father or those of his fallen compatriots. In such a discursive vacuum the maternal figure is enshrined not as a replacement for the father per se but as a symbol of origins and cultural heritage. José del Carmen Díaz's complicity in the creation of collective silence is apparent in the multiple things the poem does not say, but unlike the obfuscation inherent in colonial discourses of power, I read the poet's refusal to share certain memories as the ethical imperative of black masculinity.

Conclusion

Although Carmen Díaz's representations of enslaved women are by no means monolithic, his portraits of Lucia, Dolores and his mother share important commonalities. All three women were consigned to domestic space where they cooked and cleaned, raised children that were not their own and navigated the thorny realities and existential dangers of plantation politics. Even though the poet does not say so, the text insinuates

that the owner subjected Dolores and Lucia to sexual relations. Lucia –who apparently resisted his advances– suffered banishment from the big house while Dolores was rewarded in death alone with a small but gleaming gravestone for having fulfilled her *wifely* duties. Dolores’ tombstone is a symbol of her owner’s desire to possess dark female bodies not only as labor instruments but also as ill-fated characters in a master/slave love narrative that obfuscates the underlying principle of coercion. But such a funerary relic also rescues Dolores from anonymity and distinguishes her from the nameless corpses of the enslaved black masses. I have tried to demonstrate that healing is possible through narrative, but even as the narrator enshrines his story in the literary record, it is incumbent upon him not to subject his mother to the dangers of the dominant gaze. The poet’s silence not only honors the memory of the Afro-Caribbean women he portrayed but it also signifies the rupture, pain and unspeakable violence of Diaspora. Carmen Díaz’s poem is representative of the temporal and social ruptures, the dispersals of persons deemed property, and the collective forgetfulness inherent in diasporic cultures.

The absence of the black male companion is a leitmotif in the female slave narratives that I have analyzed in this article. The stories of the female characters represented by José del Carmen Díaz say nothing explicitly about the black male lover or husband. The premise of Manzano’s poem, “The Absent Slave Woman” (1823), is the plantation owner’s denial of the black woman’s free will, which is represented by the right to love. The slaveholder removes the black male from the sphere of influence in order to deny the black woman the earthly and divine pleasures of requited love. Mary Prince’s account ends with a divine plea that she be returned to her husband in Antigua and granted her liberty (287). In all three accounts, the absence of a black male companion signifies a deliberate shattering of the Afro-Caribbean family structure brought on by the violence of white hegemonic masculinity. For enslaved women on the plantation and, especially in the big house, the black male presence represented the prospect of romantic love (not motivated by violence or the ownership of the body) and was a sign of protection from the vicissitudes of slavery.

I believe the subjectivity of the black women in this poem is very much in doubt. If a sense of selfhood is to be achieved, it will have to occur in the spirit world because for Dolores, Lucia and the poet’s mother, the sugar plantation was a space that enslaved the body and confounded the mind. Resistance was not impossible for Afro-Caribbean women but as the stories of the black man Eugenio and Juan the Maroon made abundantly clear, struggle against racialized violence came at a bitter cost. José del Carmen Díaz does not remember the women in the same way he does the men. Theirs is not a story of violent struggle but one of negotiated identity, passive resistance, and feigned accommodation. “The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation” is an act of remembrance whose solemnity and deliberate silence does not refute the vulnerability of the black bondswoman but does manage to shield her from the scrutiny of the dominant gaze.

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² Please see, Juan Gualberto Gómez, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, ed., *Por Cuba libre: Juan Gualberto Gómez*, 2nd edition.

³ My research has turned up a list of contributors that donated financial resources to liberate the poet from Güines as well as a succinct reference to the subscription organized by *La Fraternidad* newspaper. Please see *Poetas de color* (1887) by Francisco Calcagno and *El negro en el periodismo cubano del siglo XIX* (1963) by historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux.

⁴ For more on Francisco Calcagno's abolitionism and prolific literary career please see *Cromitos cubanos* (1892) by Manuel de la Cruz (229-253).

⁵ Historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. remarks that The Ten Year's War (1868-1878) between Spain and Cuba concluded with the Pact of Zanjón, an armistice that promised administrative and political reforms, granted unconditional emancipation to all enslaved Africans and Asian indentured servants who fought in the war (125-126).

⁶ In *El negro en el periodismo cubano en el siglo XIX*, Cuban Historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux explains that Carmen Díaz not only submitted work to be published but he was among numerous collaborators in the founding of *La Armonía de Matanzas* whose first number debuted in 1879, the year of his manumission (23).

⁷ The complete list of enslaved nineteenth century Cuban poets that Yansert Fraga León treats in *Poetas esclavos en Cuba: El trinitario Ambrosio Echemendía*, includes Ambrosio Echemendía from Trinidad, José de Carmen Díaz from Güines and three poets from Camagüey (formerly Puerto Príncipe) Juan Antonio Frías, Manuel Roblejo and Néstor Cepeda (Fraga León v).

⁸ In "Poetas negros y mestizos de la época esclavista" –a short article published in a 1934 number of *Bohemia*– Cuban critic and author Ramón Guirao briefly mentions the Juan Cimarrón character in José del Carmen Díaz's "The Cemetery on the Sugar Plantation" as an example of the multiple acts of violence employed to subjugate enslaved persons.

⁹ A special thanks to the Instituto de Lingüística y Literatura in Havana and the Biblioteca Provincial "Julio Antonio Mella" and Archivo Histórico Provincial in Camagüey.

¹⁰ José del Carmen Díaz portrays a wide range of characters that reproduce the relationship between gender, the black body and white hegemonic masculinity on the slave plantation in Güines where he was held in bondage. The characters appear as following: Juan Congo, the black man Eugenio, Dolores, Juan the Maroon, Blas, the Man who hung himself, Lucia and the poet's mother (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 3-5).

¹¹ The *décima espinela* is a ten octosyllabic verse composition that can be traced to fifteenth century Spain. Originally, it was known as *la copla real*. The *copla real* finds its antecedents in Portugal and is also recited in France. In *Décima y folclor*, Jesús Orta Ruiz says that Spanish poet and musician Vicente Espinela established a new formula for the copla real and published his *Diversas Rimas* in 1591. In this way he introduced it to Golden Age writers (7, 12-13).

¹² Please see, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself: Linda Brent. in Jr. Henry Louis Gates, ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives*.

¹³ Plácido's poem "El diablito" appears in Sebastián Alfredo de Morales 1886 Cuban edition of the poet's collected works. The date of publication is unknown. Please see *Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, Plácido: Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés poesías completas con doscientas diez composiciones inéditas su retrato y un Prólogo Biográfico*, ed. Sebastián Alfredo de Morales (370-371).

¹⁴ Veis el corral de piñones

más allá de los bohíos
 donde cantan los *judíos*
 melancólicas canciones?
 Allí veis unos montones
 de tierra, de aspecto sério,
 sin árboles, sin misterio
 ni cruz, ni flores, ni nada;
 venid, es de la negra
 el humilde cementerio. [sic] (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 3)

¹⁵ All translations are mine.

¹⁶ Historian Michael Zeuske's archival work encountered the name Esteban Montejo y Mera both in notarial records in the Archive of the Province of Cienfuegos and in the press of the time. Zeuske says he found very convincing historical data, namely primary sources that prove the existence of a man called "Esteban Montejo y Mera" in the Cruces, Lajas, Palmira, and Cienfuegos area in the years between 1904 and 1912 (71, 73).

¹⁷ Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés' poem, "El egoísta" (The Self-Interested Gentleman) is fable that critiques a high society person that tramples the ashes of his ancestors to obtain a moldy old coin for his daughter. Plácido published this virtually unknown poem in *la Aurora de Matanzas*. A copy of this poem is located in the José Augusto Escoto Collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

¹⁸ Mas allá, á los resplandores
 del sol, otra tumba brilla
 con una losa sencilla:
 es la tumba de Dolores.
 ¿Mas como es que tiene flores
 y losa la tumba aquella?
 Es que Dolores fué bella
 y el amo..... Pero es misterio
 que duerme en el cementerio
 donde duerme tambien ella. [sic] (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 4)

¹⁹ Mas allá..... ¡pobre Lucia!
 criada de mano ella era,
 amó, pecó, fué ligera;
 y al campo su amo la envia.
 Pensad lo que sufriria
 con medida tan odiosa!
 su fuerza era poca cosa
 para vida tan amarga;
 no pudo sufrir la carga,
 y.....ya veis.....aquí reposa. [sic] (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 5)

²⁰ The 1804 royal decree placed a limit on the number of African male captives that could be imported and mandated that black women be brought to the Spanish America to make marriage possible (Ortiz qtd. in Castañeda, 18).

According to Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals, throughout the nineteenth century, the enslaved female population on sugar and coffee estates in Havana was a small but growing minority. Between 1791-1822, women workers made up only 15.94% of the total labor force. Their numbers more than doubled, however, between 1823-1844 to 34.15% of the population. During the period following *La Escalera* Conspiracy and leading up to the start of the Cuban wars for independence, (1845-1868) women comprised 44.54% of the plantation labor force. With exception to the final period, there were more African women on these Havana estates than women born in Cuba (192)., "Africa in Cuba: A Quantitative Analysis of the African Population of Cuba," vol. 292.

²¹ José Jacinto Milanés' poem, "La esclava con amores" (The Slave in Love) is a humorous approach to the enslaved woman whose love life takes precedent over her domestic responsibilities. Please see *José Jacinto Milanés: Obras Completas Tomo I* (411-412).

²² Adriana Lewis Galanes muses that Manzano may have adopted a feminine voice in "La esclava ausente" for dramatic effect; even still, she has reservations about attributing the poem to Manzano. Galanes posits that this poem may have been written by a woman in love with Manzano or by someone else and later confused with his work (102-03). Even so, Abdeslam Azougarh clears up questions about the poem's authorship demonstrating that Manzano indeed wrote this poem and dated it 1823. According to Azougarh "La esclava ausente" formed part of a dossier of writings that Delmonte passed to Madden to be published in England, although, for unknown reasons, Madden choose not to publish it with the poet's slave narrative (36-37).

²³ Annette Niemtow's "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative" notes that the rape of enslaved women is conspicuously absent from the nearly 6,000 extant collected slave narratives creating a deafening silence about the sexual exploitation of African descended women (Sekora, ed. 106).

²⁴ Mary Prince was born at Brackish Pond in Bermuda where she served as the bondswoman of Mister Charles Myners. As was the case with Afro-Cubans poets, Juan Francisco Manzano and José del Carmen Díaz, Mary Prince's mother was also an enslaved woman working in the big house. Her father, whose name was Prince, was a sawyer and belonged to different owner, an unnamed ship builder in Crow Lane. Similar to Juan Francisco Manzano, Mary Prince was "made quite a pet of by Miss Betsey" who she loved dearly (Prince, Gates ed. 9, 253).

²⁵ Please see Miguel Barnet's narrative, *Cimarrón: historia de un esclavo* about Esteban Montejo for more about the divisions between enslaved domestic servants and those that worked in the field in the late colonial period.

²⁶ ¿Veis aquel monton cubierto
de silvestres florecillas,
triste flores amarillas
que llaman *flores de muerto*?
Yo las cultivo, yo vierto
sobre ellas llanto abundoso.....
Dejad que llore piadoso
En incesante amargura:
¡solo en esa sepultura
halló mi madre el reposo! [sic] (Carmen Díaz, Calcagno ed. 5)

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