

## A Pan-American Life: Selected Poetry and Prose of Muna Lee

Edited and with biography by Jonathan Cohen

Foreword by Aurora Levins Morales

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004

*Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*

Like many Puerto Ricans coming of age during Luis Muñoz Marín's long tenure as the island's governor, I was always intrigued by the shadowy figure of Muñoz's first wife, Muna Lee (1895–1965). The Mississippi-born Lee, who had lived on the island since 1926, was unofficially ostracized from social and political circles concerned about offending Puerto Rico's First Lady, second-wife Inéz Mendoza, with whom Muñoz Marín had pursued an affair for a decade before his divorce from Lee. Her existence, and the details of the adulterous affair that put an end to her marriage with the future governor and Partido Popular leader, was the stuff of heady gossip among members of the political opposition. However, little was known about the life and career of a woman whose name was hardly ever mentioned in local newspapers or magazines.

Jonathan Cohen's edition of Muna Lee's work and the accompanying biographical essay function, therefore, as a combined project of historical recovery that will be of particular interest to the Puerto Rican readers among whom she spent most of her life. It reclaims Lee's place among American poets and establishes the importance of her work as a pan-Americanist whose entry into Puerto Rican society opened a path to a life-long concern with establishing closer cultural links between North and South America. The book gathers a selection of her own poetry, a representative selection of her excellent translations into English of Latin American poets, and a handful of the hundreds of essays and book reviews she published during her lifetime. Together they offer us a glimpse into the rich and complex life of a woman whose encounter with Puerto Rico—in the form of her future husband—signified a detour from life as a promising Southern poet.

Perhaps because it was the aspect of her career I knew less about, I was particularly struck, not only with the quality of Lee's poetry, but with the success and recognition she had achieved as a young poet even while writing from the relative obscurity of her job as a teacher in rural Oklahoma. Her early poems, featured in *Poetry*, H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, and *The New Republic*, show her acute consciousness of the wide spaces and distinctive botanical features of the Oklahoma landscape that initially nurtured her as a poet. This interest will broaden to incorporate the tropical scenery of her Puerto Rican surroundings, which she will celebrate in "Acacia Island," "Caribbean Marsh," and "Carib Garden," poems she published in *The New Yorker* in the early 1930s and which signaled the end of her most creative period as a published poet. There will be little original poetry written after the mid-1930s, and her only collection of verse remains *Sea Change*, published by Macmillan in 1923 and long since out of print. The poems collected here show the potential of a poetic voice with deep personal resonance and open to the natural, social, and political world discovered through her marriage to Muñoz Marín.

Lee's interest in Latin American poetry and her emerging role as a pan-Americanist—both through her translations and reviews and through her long-standing connection with the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs—came to replace the creative impulse sustained by her poetry. The depths of her contacts among U. S. government officials working for inter-continental cooperation and of her friendships with Latin American intellectuals, as described by Cohen in his biographical essay, are surprising and impressive. Through her involvement in the feminist National Women's Party, she became a strong advocate for the rights of women in pan-American societies.

Lee's translations of colonial Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (about whom Lee wrote enthusiastically), Alfonsina Storni, and Nobel Prize winner Gabriela Mistral showcased her commitment to highlighting the achievements of Latin American women writers. Her renditions of poetry by Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, José Santos Chocano, and Luis Muñoz Marín capture effortlessly the essence of the originals. There is in them much of the talent that Lee brought to her own work.

In her foreword to the book, Aurora Levins Morales laments Lee's silence, identifying in Lee a sister poet who may have heard "the corrosive, intruding, deadly voice that whispers in the ear of every woman writer . . . belittling, criticizing, stripping, mocking, poisoning the creative moment." The mystery of that silence is deepened by reading the poems assembled in this collection and the essays in which she writes with an acute understanding of the work of other poets. Cohen's biographical essay, which gathers the facts of a public and personal life full of accomplishments and honors, calls for a book-length biography that contextualizes the nuances. This collection, by gathering a significant

selection of her work, helps us begin to appreciate an important figure in pan-American literature.

*Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert is Professor of Hispanic Studies at Vassar College. She is the author of a number of books, among them Creole Religions of the Caribbean (2003, with Margarite Fernández Olmos), Phyllis Shand-Allfrey: A Caribbean Life (1996), and the forthcoming Literatures of the Caribbean (2007).*