

Introduction

Excilia Saldaña (b. 1946), was an accomplished Cuban poet, translator, essayist, university professor (Universidad Pedagógica de Santa Clara), and member of the editorial board Editorial Gente Nueva in Havana. She died in Havana on July 20, 1999, from complications suffered as a result of a severe asthma attack. The next day, Mercedes Santos Moray declared in *Juventud Rebelde*, “Your friends, your comrades, your son, your readers, have not lost you because you have overcome death with life, a life that pulses and will endure in your works.”¹ In homage to Saldaña, writer and critic Consuelo Ramírez Enríquez wrote in the short story “El vientre del pez” (The Belly of the Fish):

she cultivated plants and friendships, collected glass and wrought iron fences, gave classes on grammar and tenderness, assembled books by the hundreds, and from her noble and panting breath, from her clean and breathless chest, from her bosom always in silent torture, she tore out verses and more verses, and more verses. . . . Verses that if written in small letters could well reach around the entire island—if only people understood that this is not a metaphor! That when it seemed that she had emptied her chest, her heaving chest, without air, drowned in asthma and in torture, new, even more beautiful verses emerged, surprisingly beautiful, because her bosom was a well with its bed in the INFINITE.²

During her lifetime, Excilia Saldaña struggled to make her works known in the Americas as much as she struggled with her breath—in spite of the fact that her children’s books have been translated in several Eastern and Western European countries, in spite of the fact that “The Wife’s Monologue,” *Kele Kele*, and *La Noche* have been staged in Cuba and Sweden, in spite of the fact that she has received multiple prizes

in her homeland, including the Premio Rosa Blanca, Premio Nacional Ismaelillo, Premio La Edad de Oro for her children's books, as well as the Nicolás Guillén Distinction for Poetry in 1998, given by the UNEAC (National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists).

In the Vortex of the Cyclone, containing translations of some of her major works, including two autobiographical poems, samples of her children's poetry, an erotic letter, and a few poems representative of her voice from the beginning and the end of her poetic career, hopes to ensure that her words will endure for English and Spanish speakers alike.

Since the 1980s, several critics have given attention to interpretations of her poetry. The work of Catherine Davies, for example, places her in the context of women writers in twentieth-century Cuba and points to her Afrocentric definition of the Cuban female subject within a national and international context.³

My own critical interest in Saldaña's poetry centers around her repeated attempts at defining the autobiographical and poetic self. In her search for her own signature, Saldaña echoes and transforms masters from a wide range of literary traditions, including Shakespeare, Quevedo, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Walt Whitman, Nicolás Guillén, Lydia Cabrera, Vicente Huidobro, Martí, Lezama Lima, García Lorca, Dora Alonso, Renée Potts, Mirta Aguirre, and many others. When speaking about her poetic indebtedness, Saldaña stated, in her essay "The Transcendent Quotidian: Reflections on my Poetic Works":⁴

As a writer, I feel indebted to everyone. The list is going to be endless. As far as my family is concerned, to Ana Excilia—grandmother, and to my grandfather Esteban. To my mother; to the incentive of a relative whom I never knew, but who is one of the protagonists of Cuban culture: Juan Francisco Sariol, editor of *Orto*, the journal from Manzanillo. As far as my DNA goes, to my maternal grandmother, about whom they say that she filled notebooks with poems and delivered lectures at the Rotary Club, in spite of being black as night, or rather, of being "the little Congo woman," as she was called. I did not know her, but she navigates in my blood. As far as the universal literary family, I'm indebted to everyone who wrote and whom I have read. As far as the Cuban literary family: Nicolás, Lezama, all of Orígenes, Ballagas, Brull, Mirta, Dora, the two Renées, Onelio . . . Of the contemporary ones I say nothing, but without plagiarizing them, I assert that I have incorporated them

all. I have learned something from all of them, and I admire them for the humility with which they give themselves, for the goodness and the love that they have toward children.

Just recently I found out that I owed much to film and dance: the turns of Alicia Alonso, of ballet in general, are the turns with which I dream. They are the turns of the flight of poetry.

And to Martí, of course. (p. 11)

In response to the statement by the Cuban critic Virgilio López Remus that "Excilia Saldaña is a living classic of literature written for children and young adults," Saldaña responded:

I am not a classic. Martí is a classic, one who has been proven to be by time, nation and ideology. To say of me that I am a classic is a metaphor, not an axiom, and I hope it will not become a sophism. I am a lady who wishes to write poetry. I have the wish, although I lack the instrument like the cinematographic Saliery. I am someone with a lot of fear of being mistaken, and someone with a lot of persistence. I am not [a classic]. I hope my books will be. (p. 11)

Excilia Saldaña weaves the personal, the mythical, and the literary in an attempt to bring together the domestic and the transcendental, the temporal and the eternal. She defines poetry as a perpetual search for the transcendent quotidian:

I prefer to baptize this search as a form of internalism, because what I look for is roots, what I look for is the internal essence of poetry. In other words: poetry without boundaries, be it in prose or in verse, and even in its self-reflection; in a way this poetic reflection could be indebted to the poetic image of Lezama Lima, only that this internalization, this internalist poetry is rooted in the senses, in reality. It is not in the image but in its becoming that it finds its full incarnation. Sometime in some conference about my work, I classified it as the transcendent quotidian, or what is the same, as the task of ordinary people which is an expression of a greater spiritual task, the order of life to find the cosmic order. Because of that, I am sustained, or rather, my poetry is sustained by an ethics, by a morality that is the essence itself of our national identity. (p. 8)

This link between her quotidian poetic reality and Cuban national identity finds expression in the poet's inventive search for an image that

fuses the self with the island and the literary heritage founded by Martí: "I am the Night. I am the Island. / Two homelands contained in me." (Unfinished Danzon for Night and Island).

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In this brief autobiographical statement from Excilia Saldaña's collection of children's poems, *La Noche*, the personal becomes the mythical:

I was born August 7, 1946, at six in the afternoon when the sun was about ready to give way to Night. Then she arrived: from the adolescent arms of my mother I went to hers, arms made to be grandmother's: my grandmother. Now, when I see her in photographs, I see an ageless woman, ruddy and healthy like any daughter of a Caribbean mulatto woman and of an islander. She is no longer; some gold bracelets, a broken pitcher and the profile of my son remain. But, isn't memory the presence of the heart? She lives on. I have my strange name which is hers, and the memories: unwithering, ours.

In the old house of La Víbora, or under the huge porch in Santa Fé, I learned her word and her silence. And the best part of me.⁵

The gesture of the infant's being handed over into the grandmother's arms signifies not only the giving of the baby to the grandmother's care, but also the gesture of the child's being handed into the Afro-Cuban tradition. This transition from the personal to the mythical sphere is made concrete with the image of the photograph bearing "an ageless woman," born out of the figure that reinvents the origin of Cuban culture, the mulatto woman, product of the imposed miscegenation of the Spanish and the African.

The gold bracelets and the broken pitcher, fragments of the past, represent the grandmother's presence, as does her profile projected in Saldaña's son. In this prose poem, Excilia Saldaña positions herself as the link to a past that—but for the memories engraved in the poet's imagination—could be erased. The future depends on the poet's ability to nurture it with her own words.

The grandmother's image in the poet's name, "my strange name," and in the sounds and silences of the grandmother's voice, has given Saldaña "the best part of me," her poetic idiom. At sites of the domestic and the public, the poet-grandchild receives the oral tradition, in the house and