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Speaking in Tongues: Celebrating Walt Whitman in Translation

"Countersong to Walt Whitman": Pedro Mir's Radical Dialogue with the Bard

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ABSTRACT. *Pedro Mir is the Dominican Republic's foremost poet of the twentieth century. His "Contracanto a Walt Whitman" ("Countersong to Walt Whitman"), published in 1952, belongs to the long tradition of Spanish American poets addressing Whitman. In this poem Mir consciously responds to Whitman's call to future poets to "arouse" and "justify" him. The poem uses the epic form to tell the history of the United States. It becomes a "countersong" to the poetic "I" of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, in particular "Song of Myself." The poem revolves on Mir's dialogue with Whitman. To create this dialogue, Mir incorporates Whitman's voice by means of lines taken from the Spanish translation of "Song of Myself" made by Spanish poet León Felipe. This paper elucidates how Mir's "Countersong" furthers the Latin American poetic tradition of addressing Whitman in verse, and also how its English translation not only back-translates Whitman whose lines are woven into the Spanish text but fulfills the Whitmanian inter-American intention of the poem. The paper further explains how this translation expands the boundaries of U.S. literature through the transnational vision of Mir.*

RÉSUMÉ. Pedro Mir est le poète du XXe siècle le plus important en République dominicaine. Son « Contracanto a Walt Whitman », publié en 1952, s'inscrit dans la longue tradition des réponses adressées à Whitman par les poètes hispano-américains. Dans ce poème, Mir réagit à l'injonction faite par Whitman aux poètes de l'avenir de « surgir » et de le « justifier ». Le poète a recours à la forme épique pour narrer l'histoire des États-Unis. Le poème devient un « contre-chant » répondant au « Je » poétique omniprésent dans Leaves of Grass, tout particulièrement dans « Song of Myself ». Le fil conducteur du poème est le dialogue entre Mir et Whitman. Pour créer ce dernier, Mir incorpore la voix de Whitman telle qu'elle est donnée à entendre dans la traduction en espagnol proposée par le poète espagnol León Felipe. Cet article met en lumière la façon dont le « Contre-chant » de Mir poursuit la tradition poétique latino-américaine des adresses faites en vers à Whitman. Il met également en avant la façon dont sa traduction en anglais retraduit Whitman, dont les vers sont intégrés au texte espagnol, afin de répondre à l'intention whitmanienne de voir son texte occuper une position de médiation entre les Amériques. Cet article explique en outre comment cette traduction repousse les limites de la littérature états-unienne grâce à la vision transnationale proposée par Mir.

MOTS CLÉS : Walt Whitman, Pedro Mir, traduction, inter-américain

KEYWORDS: *Walt Whitman, Pedro Mir, translation, inter-American*

Pedro Mir (1913-2000) is the Dominican Republic's foremost poet of the twentieth century, named the country's *Poeta Nacional* (National Poet; i.e., Poet Laureate) by the Dominican Congress in the early 1980s. His "Contracanto a Walt Whitman" ("Countersong to Walt Whitman"), which he published in 1952, belongs to the long tradition of Spanish American poets addressing Whitman. This poem in free verse comprises seventeen numbered sections, and originally appeared as a book. It uses the epic form to tell the social history of the United States, with emphasis on how its focus on wealth and materialism undermines its ideals. The poem is a "countersong" to the poetic "I" of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, in particular "Song of Myself," intended not to counter or oppose it but rather to counterpoint it with a radical attitude and complement it, as done with music in weaving different melodies of songs. It revolves on Mir's dialogue with Whitman that incorporates Whitman's voice by means of verses taken from the 1941 Spanish translation of "Song of Myself" made by Spanish poet León Felipe. For Mir Whitman is the great American poet of democracy: "you [Whitman] were the people, you were I, / and I was Democracy, the people's family name" (Mir 2018, 87). Indeed, Mir explains in an interview with Coromoto Galvis that he wrote his poem in response to Felipe's introductory poem to his translation, in which he maintains a thesis that, to Mir's thinking, contradicts the vision that Whitman had of democracy, because Felipe says he prefers the heroic in Whitman to the democratic. To Mir it seemed the heroic was always the product of war, so he decided to answer Felipe with his "Countersong" (Galvis 33).

The aim of this paper is to elucidate how Mir's "Countersong to Walt Whitman" furthers the Latin American tradition of addressing Whitman in verse, and also how its English translation[1] not only employs Whitman's original language through back-translation, but helps fulfill the transnational inter-American ambition of the Spanish text.

Whitman's popularity among Latin American poets is well established. Mary Edgar Meyer points out: "If the reading of an author's work, allusions, imitations and dedications are an index to popularity, Walt Whitman was one of the most popular among the poets of Latin America." She emphasizes that "the number of times he is mentioned in their works alone indicates the extent of interest aroused by him and their attitude toward him" (Meyer 32). Jean Franco, in her "Foreword to the Countersong," locates Mir's place in the tradition of Latin American poets addressing Whitman:

> Mir's dialogue with Whitman belongs to a longstanding tradition. Whitman had been an icon to Latin Americans ever since the Cuban poet, José Martí, heard him speak in 1887, at what would be his last public appearance in New York. Martí's

[1] Other translators have translated sections of "Countersong to Walt Whitman" into English; namely, Didier Tisdel Jaén (1969) and Donald D. Walsh (1976). Only the present author, however, has made and published a translation of the complete poem, which Mir himself declared "el más hermoso" (the most beautiful) (Mir 1986).

> description fixed his image as a poet-prophet far above mere mortals. He wrote, "He [Whitman] seemed like a god last night, seated on a throne of red velvet, with his white hair, his beard falling on his chest, his eyebrows thick as a forest, his hand resting on a cane." Whitman's words, according to Martí, resembled the murmur of planets. But perhaps what most attracted Latin Americans, even those like Nicaragua's Rubén Darío who believed democracy to be at odds with art, was his American idiom and his claim to represent a New World. (Franco 14)

John E. Englekirk's observation made in the mid-twentieth century is illuminating, as well: "Whitman, the New World prophet and rebel poet [. . .] has become since the turn of the century one of the leading spiritual forces of young Spanish America" (Englekirk 138). Mir himself doubted that "people in the United States appreciate and admire Walt Whitman as much as Latin Americans do" (Lawlor n. pag.). Franco observes that "Mir's poem is both a celebration of Whitman and an assertion of difference—a celebration of the poet of the common people and a denunciation of the 'manifest destiny' of the nation that Whitman had helped to build" (Franco 14).

Mir published his first poems in 1937. He soon gained considerable attention not only among young intellectuals in the Dominican Republic, who welcomed him as a "social poet," but also among the cultural officials of the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, who viewed him with suspicion. Trujillo ruled the small nation with an iron fist from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. He freely murdered such critics as Mir. The United States remained complacent during his regime largely because he catered to its financial interests; when he came to power the Dominican Republic was encumbered by an external multi-million-dollar debt to U.S. financial institutions in the form of Dominican bonds (Pulley 27). By 1947 it became clear to Mir that he needed to leave the country for his own safety. He fled to Cuba where he lived for years. Once he left the Dominican Republic, the regime's cultural arm did its best to suppress his name, as seen in a Dominican poetry anthology "whose first edition in 1943 had prominently displayed his poems but omitted him completely in the second edition of 1951" (Torres-Saillant 2018, 8).

Mir's dislocations and life in exile were hard for him. Cuba became his first home away from home. He did not join famous intellectual circles. He quietly earned a humble living, doing menial jobs even though he had earned a law degree prior to his exile. But he continued to write. While in Cuba he published "Hay un país en el mundo" ("There Is a Country in the World") in 1949. This epic poem, his first major work, achieved wide popularity in his homeland. In fact, over time it became something of a national anthem in the Dominican Republic. The poem opens this way, in the translation by Donald D. Walsh:

> There is
> a country in the world
> situated
> right in the sun's path.
> A native of the night.

Situated
in an improbable archipelago
of sugar and alcohol.
Simply
light,
like a bat's wing
leaning on the breeze.
Simply
bright,
like the trace of a kiss on an elderly
maiden,
or daylight on the roof tiles.
Simply
fruitful. Fluvial. And material. And yet
simply torrid, abused and kicked
like a young girl's hips.
Simply sad and oppressed.
Sincerely wild and uninhabited. (Mir 2018, 21)

The political dimension of this national epic prefigures the radical dialogue that Mir would soon have with Whitman. Here, Mir is the poet of his people, in the Whitman tradition. "There Is a Country in the World" contains revolutionary visions of his homeland, including this one:

A dollar! Here is the result. A torrent of blood.
Silent, terminal. Blood wounded on the wind.
Blood in the cash profit of bitterness.
This is a country unworthy of being called a country.
Call it rather tomb, coffin, hole, or sepulcher.
It is true that I kiss it and that it kisses me
and that its kiss tastes of nothing but blood.
That a day will come, hidden in hope,
its basket filled with relentless rage
and taut faces and fists and daggers.
But beware. There is no justice if the punishment
falls on everyone. Let us seek out the guilty.
And then let the infinite weight of the people
fall upon the shoulders of the guilty. (Mir 2018, 39)

History is at the core of the subject matter of "There Is a Country in the World"—namely, the Dominican Republic—just as it is in "Countersong to Walt Whitman," Mir's next long poem in which "the historiographical texture increases and the epical tenor is heightened" (Torres-Saillant 1991, 203).

Mir published "Countersong to Walt Whitman" as a book in Guatemala during a brief sojourn there. It elicited not much of a critical response at the time; no fanfare occurred (Torres-Saillant 2018, 8). The publisher, Saker-Tí (1947-1954), was issuing books of mainly Guatemalan poets. Saker-Tí ("Dawn" in the indigenous Mayan

language Kaqchikel) was a collective of young writers committed to democratic values and to revaluing Guatemala's native cultural legacy. Mir's politics resonated with theirs; the Guatemalan group wound up joining the Communist Party *en masse* (Cardoza y Aragón 635). The members of the group supported the democratically elected presidents of Guatemala, Juan José Arévalo (1945-1951) of the leftist Partido Acción Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Action Party) and Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán (1951-1954) of the same party— the latter of whom, a democratic socialist, was ousted in a U.S.-backed *coup d'état* under the dark cloud of the Cold War. Soon after its publication, Mir's book entered the United States and was listed in the "Books Received" section of the November 1952 issue of *Poetry* magazine ("Books" 155), along with another Saker-Tí poetry book. Why they both appeared in the section titled "Prose, Reprints, Translations and Anthologies," instead of the "Original Verse" section where they belonged, is inexplicable.

Mir's Saker-Tí book, *Contracanto a Walt Whitman*, carries the subtitle *Canto a nosotros mismos* (Song of Ourselves), which underscores the poem's counterpoint to "Song of Myself."[2] The book further includes a headnote with a free translation of the opening line of section 24 of "Song of Myself": "Yo, Walt Whitman, un cosmos, un hijo de Manhattan" (I, Walt Whitman, a cosmos, a son of Manhattan; discussed later). The "Countersong" starts with this lyric prologue in which Mir establishes his close relationship with Whitman:

I,
  a son of the Caribbean,
Antillean to be exact.
The raw product of a simple
Puerto Rican girl
                and a Cuban worker,
born precisely, and poor,
on Quisqueyan soil.
Overflowing with voices,
full of eyes
wide open throughout the islands,
I have come to speak to Walt Whitman,
a kosmos,
          of Manhattan the son.
People will ask,
                Who are you?
                                I understand.
Nobody had better ask me
who Walt Whitman is.
I would go sob on his white beard.
And yet,
I am going to say again who Walt Whitman is,

[2] Felipe's Spanish translation of "Song of Myself" is titled "Canto a mí mismo" which uses the preposition "a" (to) instead of "de" (of) found in more literal Spanish translations of the poem's title.

a kosmos,
of Manhattan the son. (Mir 2018, 65)

The prologue repeats and closes with Whitman's defining image of his persona, articulated in "Song of Myself," as "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (Whitman 1892, 48). This echo of Whitman's own words, in the back-translation here, occurs seven times subsequently throughout the poem (sections 3, 7, 9, 13, and 14). Mir also uses "kosmos" in the body of the poem to bestow dignity on individuals toiling in Spanish American nations, as in section 13, where he points to "an I, a kosmos, in the cane fields, / and in the railroad cars and the sugar mills" (Mir 2018, 99). The proud first-person singular pronoun "I" is introduced in the prologue. It is the very first word of the poem: "Yo" (I).

Not only does Mir establish his close relationship with Whitman in the prologue, he also insists on his Caribbean/Antillean identity, as he does at various turns in the body of the poem. Silvio Torres-Saillant explains Mir's insistence on his own identity in the "Countersong": "While the poem clearly intends to cover the drama of all the countries of the Americas, the speaker always expresses himself from a Caribbean perspective and the focal point of the 'countersong' remains in the archipelago." (Torres-Saillant 1991, 209) It should be noted that "Quisqueya," where Mir locates his origin in the prologue, is the aboriginal name of Mir's homeland. Its use echoes Whitman's fondness for using aboriginal place names, as in his poems "Mannahatta" (Whitman 1892, 360) and "Starting from Paumanok" (18).

Following the prologue, the "Countersong" moves to Mir's historical account of the rise of capitalism and the birth of empire in the United States. Throughout his account he weaves in the speaker's parenthetical vocal appeals to Whitman, defining him in terms of his famous gray beard: "(O luminous-bearded Walt Whitman . . .!)" (Mir 2018, 69) in section 2; "(O Walt Whitman of trusting beard . . .!)" (75) in section 5; and "(O Walt Whitman, of tattered beard!)" (93) in section 11.

At the center of the poem is Mir's representation of Whitman's voice—his popular, collective "I"; his voice of the people—as a fulfillment of nineteenth-century democratic idealism that is made hollow by the forces of capital at the turn of the century, at the hands of the so-called Robber Barons and others with shared values. Christopher Conway further observes:

> [Mir's] "countersong" proper begins at this juncture: by way of their resistance to empire, the oppressed masses of Latin America rush in to rescue Whitman from his capitalist captors and restore him to his originary, democratic glory. Thus, the fulfillment of liberty and justice for the Latin American victims of capital is also the fulfillment of Anglo-American identity in its original, "Whitmanian" definition. Mir charts these epochal changes in North and South America's shared history through an exploration of the subject status of the peoples of both Americas. The prominent use of the words *yo*, *nosotros*, *mío*, and *nuestro* (I, we, mine, and ours) establishes the primacy of community and liberty for the definition of self. The "Countersong" thus moves on two intertwined tracks: while charting epochal shifts according to a

> rudimentary materialist model, Mir narrates the changing status of the signifiers that define the subject status of a people. (Conway 162)

Conway concludes ultimately about the "Countersong" that "Mir's representation of Whitman exalts the democratic potential of the United States and damns its imperial excesses" (Conway 161). He places Mir squarely in the Latin American tradition of addressing Whitman: "Like many other Latin American intellectuals, including José Martí and Pablo Neruda, Mir uses Whitman both to focus a critique of Anglo-American culture as well as to delineate the contours of a contestatory, pan-American identity" (161-162).

José Manuel Batista maintains that Mir's poem is not only a countersong to the poetic "I" of *Leaves of Grass* but a reply to Whitman's 1871 prose work *Democratic Vistas* (Batista 235). Like Whitman, Mir condemns the corruption and greed of the Gilded Age, going on to condemn the modern proponents of wealth. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman denounces the post-Civil War materialism that had overtaken the country:

> I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of The States are not honestly believed in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melo-dramatic screamings,) nor is Humanity itself believed in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appalling. [. . .] The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The whole of the official services of America, National, State, and Municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the Judiciary, are steeped, saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the Judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. In fashionable life, flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time. In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. [. . .] I say that our New World Democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects. (Whitman 1871, 11-12)

Whitman's solution to the moral crisis was literature, which he believed could unite and elevate the nation: "Should some two or three really original American poets, (perhaps artists or lecturers,) arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, [. . .] they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to These States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties." (Whitman 1871, 9) In contrast, Mir's solution to the depravity and oppression he observes in the United States and throughout the Americas, as he argues in the "Countersong," is the rising up together of "the wretched of the earth, / the populators of the world, / the heroes

of everyday work" (Mir 2018, 107) demanding equity and social justice through radical action.

With the sweep of an epic poem, section 1 of the "Countersong" recalls the mythic image of America as a virgin land awaiting the arrival of settlers and pioneers aiming to build a new nation:

> There once was a virgin wilderness.
> Trees and land without deeds or fences.
> There once was a perfect wilderness.
> Many years ago. Long before the ancestors of our ancestors.
> The plains would play with galloping buffalo.
> The endless coastlines would play with pearls.
> The rocks let loose diamonds from their wombs.
> And the hills played with goats and gazelles . . .
>
> The breeze would swirl through clearings in the woods
> heavy with the bold play of deer and birch trees
> filling the pores of evening with seed.
> And it was a virgin land filled with surprises.
> Wherever a clump of earth touched a seed
> all of a sudden there grew a sweet-smelling forest.
> At times it was assaulted by a frenzy of pollen
> squeezing out the poplars, the pines, the fir trees,
> and pouring out the night and landscapes in clusters.
> And there were caverns and woods and prairies
> teeming with brooks and clouds and animals. (Mir 2018, 67)

Mir first addresses Whitman directly in section 6:

> O Walt Whitman, your sensitive beard
> was a net in the wind!
> It throbbed and filled with ardent figures
> of sweethearts and youths, of brave souls and farmers,
> of country boys walking to creeks,
> of rowdies wearing spurs and maidens wearing smiles,
> of the hurried marches of numberless beings,
> of tresses or hats . . .
> And you went on listening
> road after road,
> striking their heartstrings
> word after word.
> O Walt Whitman of guileless beard,
> I have come through the years to your red blaze of fire! (Mir 2018, 77)

Mir's embrace of Whitman is demonstrated here not only by his attitude of profound respect but by his use of one of the hallmark features of Whitman's poetic

style; namely, cataloging images in parallel construction. This technique resonates in section 9 and echoes the catalogs in "Song of Myself":

> For that's why you, numerous Walt Whitman, who saw and ranted
> just the right word for singing your people,
> who in the middle of the night said
> I
> and the fisherman understood himself in his slicker
> and the hunter heard himself in the midst of his gunshot
> and the woodcutter recognized himself in his axe
> and the farmer in his freshly sown field and the gold
> panner in his yellow reflection on the water
> and the maiden in her future town
> growing and maturing
> under her skirt
> and the prostitute in her fountain of gaiety
> and the miner of darkness in his steps beneath his homeland . . . (Mir 2018, 85, 87)

Creating his own cast of Americans in the "Countersong," Mir conjures the Whitman of "Song of Myself" who claims "I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1982, 78) and who presents his multitudes in long lists:

> The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
> The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
> The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
> The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
> The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
> The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
> The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
> The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
> The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and rye,
> The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
> (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)
> The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
> He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr with the manuscript [. . .] (Whitman 1892, 39)

After depicting the force of Whitman's first-person pronoun "I"—the gospel of individualism—that urged the self-confidence necessary to build a nation, Mir makes a powerful leap in section 15, which opens this way:

> And now
> it is no longer the word
> I
> the accomplished word
> the password to begin the world.

And now
now it is the word
we.
And now,
now has come the hour of the countersong.
We the railroad workers,
we the students,
we the miners,
we the peasants,
we the wretched of the earth,
the populators of the world,
the heroes of everyday work,
with our love and our fists,
enamored of hope. (Mir 2018, 107)

Here, with his line "the password to begin the world," Mir echoes Whitman in section 24 of "Song of Myself": "I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy" (Whitman 1892, 48). The final section of the "Countersong" (section 17) shows clearly how its English translation not only uses Whitman's own language but fulfills the Spanish text as a Pan-American poem that includes the citizens of the United States. The section embodies Mir's radical hemispheric vision. It begins:

Why did you want to listen to a poet?
I am speaking to one and all.
To those of you who came to isolate him from his people,
to separate him from his blood and his land,
to flood his road.
Those of you who drafted him into the army.
The ones who defiled his luminous beard and put a gun
on his shoulders that were loaded with maidens and pioneers.
Those of you who do not want Walt Whitman, the democrat,
but another Whitman, atomic and savage.
The ones who want to outfit him with boots
to crush the heads of nations.
To grind into blood the temples of little girls.
To smash into atoms the old man's flesh.
The ones who take the tongue of Walt Whitman
for a sign of spraying bullets,
for a flag of fire.
No, Walt Whitman, here are the poets of today
aroused to justify you!
Poets to come! . . . Arouse! for you must justify me.
Here we are, Walt Whitman, to justify you.
Here we are
for your sake
demanding peace.
The peace you needed

to drive the world with your song.
Here we are
saving your hills of Vermont,
your woods of Maine, the sap and fragrance of your land,
your spurred rowdies, your smiling maidens,
your country boys walking to creeks. (Mir 2018, 115, 117)

Here, Mir not only quotes Whitman directly from the bard's famous inscription "Poets to Come" (Whitman 1892, 18), he uses images taken directly from "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass*; for example, "hills of Vermont" and "woods of Maine" (42).

The Spanish renderings of Whitman's words have numerous possibilities in English. For instance, the Spanish line "Poetas venideros, levantaos, porque vosotros debéis justificarme" could be rendered as "Poets to come, get up, because you must justify me;" or, "Poets coming, arise, for ye must justify me;" or, "Future poets, rise up, because you ought to justify me." The pitfalls of back-translation are obvious. Only Whitman's actual words can ring true in the English translation of the "Countersong," Likewise, the image "colinas de Vermont" could be "Vermont hills" or "hills in Vermont" or even "mountains of Vermont," Similarly, "selvas de Maine" could be translated as "Maine woods" (after Thoreau's 1864 excursion book, *The Maine Woods*) or translated as "forests in Maine." To achieve the precise echoes of Whitman's voice, the translator employed the actual language used by Whitman, as found in section 16 of "Song of Myself" (Whitman 1892, 42).

The most significant back-translation—that is, in this case, restoration—is of the line repeated multiple times throughout the "Countersong"; namely, Mir's adaptation of the opening line of section 24 of "Song of Myself": "Yo, Walt Whitman, un cosmos, un hijo de Manhattan" (I, Walt Whitman, a cosmos, a son of Manhattan). In the first three editions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the line in "Song of Myself" that Mir echoes here reads "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (Whitman 1855, 29) and in later editions, it reads "Walt Whitman am I, a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son" (Whitman 1872, 54). The final form of the line is "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (Whitman 1892, 48). Mir claims to have used the Spanish translation of it made by León Felipe (Mir 1986). However, Mir's line is far from Felipe's free rendering: "Yo soy Walt Whitman . . . / Un cosmos. ¡Miradme! / El hijo de Manhattan" (I am Walt Whitman . . . / A cosmos. Look at me! / The son of Manhattan) (Felipe 64). Felipe's translation was apparently a point of departure for Mir who decided to alter Whitman's line by changing the definite article "el" (the) to the indefinite article "un" (a) in describing Whitman's relation to Manhattan.[3] In contrast, as the translator of the

[3] Despite Mir's claim that Felipe's translation was his source, it is likely Mir was familiar with Álvaro Armando Vasseur's translation, *Walt Whitman: Poemas*—the first substantial collection of Whitman's poems in Spanish—in which the opening line of section 24 is rendered as "Yo soy Walt Whitman, un cosmos, un hijo de Manhattan" (Whitman 1912, 82).

"Countersong," I chose to use the definite article in the English rendering. My justification is that Mir presents the line as a direct quotation from "Song of Myself" in the poem's headnote. Most important, I believe English-language readers expect to hear Whitman himself in this line.

Readers of verse translations are entitled to an explanation of how translators define the aims of their work, given that the approaches to translating poetry range from very literal to very liberal. My approach is described in my "Translation Note" that appears in Mir's *Countersong to Walt Whitman and Other Poems*:

> I do not follow, in a slavish way, the letter of Mir's Spanish. Nor do I assume the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense of "Countersong to Walt Whitman," but to forsake them as I see occasion. I translate word for word when precise and poetic enough, and sense for sense when necessary, in an effort to create a lyric paraphrase that attempts to be faithful to both the meaning and the poetic quality of the original poem. I have thus tried to use language with real feeling that expresses the poet's ideas and that also sings the way he does in the "Countersong." Whitman's own words, it should be noted, are used here when called for by the Spanish rendering of them. (Cohen 17)

Commenting on my translation, Mir told me: "Su traducción me ha fascinado. Sin ser literal, ni mucho menos, es tan fiel y conserva tanto el estilo mismo y en general el espíritu del poema, que a veces pienso que supera el original" (Your translation fascinates me. Without being literal, not in the least, it is so faithful and preserves the very style and overall the spirit of the poem so much, that sometimes I think it surpasses the original) (Mir 1986).

My translation, to contextualize it, was made in 1986. At the time I was immersed in translating Latin American poetry and devoting considerable time and energy to the work of Nicaraguan poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal in particular, who like Mir was an active socially-committed poet (during this period Cardenal was Sandinista Nicaragua's Minister of Culture). Living on Long Island—Whitman's "Paumanok"—I was keenly aware of the bard's presence. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was essential to me. In 1987 *Agni Review* published my poem "Walt Whitman in Ohio," written during a sojourn in the early 1980s in the Midwest. The poem demonstrates my attitude toward Whitman:

> Walt Whitman has come to visit me
> in Ohio
> I look at the beard of my old friend and teacher
> like a gray spider web of rain
> I look at his boots covered with American mud
> In two rocking chairs
> we sit out on the back porch
> exchanging words
> Wherever he looks
> his gaze
> causes the shoot of a poem to grow

Where is your kosmos? I ask him
Where is the Western world one and inseparable?
the democracy? the eternal progress?
Rain drips down from his eyelids
into the constellation of his beard
His shoulders bend
under the invisible weight
That's up to you, he says calmly
I am expecting the main things from you. (Cohen 1987)

This poem shows a commonality between myself and Mir, for whom Whitman was his "constant companion of Manhattan" (Mir 2018, 117). Its closing line derives from the closing line of Whitman's "Poets to Come," the source of Mir's echo of Whitman in the final section of the "Countersong," where he has Whitman declaiming it: "*Poets to come! . . . Arouse! for you must justify me*" (Mir 2018, 115). Thus, as a gathering of shared interests and passions, Mir's radical dialogue with Whitman attracted me and motivated me to make my translation of the "Countersong," The act of translation I performed in terms of Mir was very much in keeping with my own poetics and social literary aspirations, including inter-American harmony.

Mir's "Countersong to Walt Whitman," as Conway observes, is "a part of the deeply entrenched 'Whitman tradition' in Latin American literature, but its importance should not be reduced to literary history's genealogical or serialized paradigms." He goes on to explain: "Mir's poem presents a complex analysis of the imperial experience, both in the center and on the periphery. It is a testament to the artistry of the poem that Mir locates the experience of empire in the very heart of language, in the pronouns that are used to designate the intimate conditions of social existence and its relationship to the painful trials of historical processes" (Conway 170). The poem's subtitle "Song of Ourselves" underscores the epic's radical shift from "I" to "we"—from the lone individual to the united masses—and its call to radical redefinition of the nation and its values that distinguishes this epic work in the Latin American tradition of poets writing in direct response to Whitman—from Nicaragua's Rubén Darío ("Walt Whitman") to Chile's Pablo Neruda ("Ode to Walt Whitman") to Argentina's Ezequiel Martínez Estrada ("Walt Whitman") and Jorge Luis Borges ("Camden, 1892"). For Darío Whitman is a "high priest" (Jaén 13); for Neruda an "elder first cousin" who taught him "to be an American" (45, 49); for Martínez Estrada a trailblazer "wandering among abstruse and upper circles, / or else, simply alive and paradoxical" (15); and for Borges a dying "happy colleague" whose "verse is rhythmal / to the splendid life" (3). Mir is the poet who, more than others, sees Whitman as the bard of Pan America and poet of democracy.

Beyond offering readers a major work of Latin American poetry, the English translation of the "Countersong" expands the boundaries of U.S. literature. The poem fits naturally in the literature of the United States. There is nothing overtly foreign about its poetic language or style. The principal figure the poem addresses and much of the history it relates are iconic American. It echoes Whitman. Indeed,

the "Countersong" in English joins the numerous homages to Whitman written originally in English by U.S. poets, which form a dynamic and still growing body of poetry, together with the English translations of all the many foreign-language poems written in this tradition (Coghill and Tammaro). If a national literature is a nation's attempt to define itself, this poem defines Anglo America—specifically, the United States—from the experiential perspective of the so-called Other America, that is, Latin America. This transnational aspect of the translation constitutes a significant expansion of U.S. literature's consciousness. The poem defines Anglo America in hemispheric terms. The "Countersong" now resides with Whitman and "Song of Myself," forming a major counterpoint to his *Leaves of Grass*. When in the poem Mir proclaims "Here we are, Walt Whitman, to justify you" (Mir 2018, 115), the referent of his "we" includes both Latin and Anglo Americans. His perspective moves freely through the Americas, as for instance his ecological vision—"Here we are / saving your hills of Vermont, / your woods of Maine, the sap and fragrance of your land" (117)—points to activism in the United States. In this way, Mir's hemispheric vision expands the meaning of America and its different national identities.

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with a pair of statements by two leading contemporary Dominican authors, Julia Alvarez and Chiqui Vicioso, who compare Mir with Whitman. The author of the novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez—Dominican American, to be precise—calls Mir "our very own Whitman of the Caribbean" (Alvarez 120). And Vicioso, author of numerous works in a range of genres, including *Cómo escribir un poema con Pedro Mir* (How to Write a Poem with Pedro Mir) written to commemorate the centenary of Mir's birth, claims:

> Don Pedro is an oceanic poet whose work can only be compared to Walt Whitman's, in its symbolic range, for its movement between the allegorical and the biographical and between the biographical and the historical, for its course through the geography and traditions of the peoples to whom he sings. With one big difference: Walt was the poet of the North American man and woman, in the singular, and Don Pedro was a poet of the multitudes of Pan America" (Vicioso ix).

In sum, Pedro Mir's "Countersong to Walt Whitman" holds a prominent place in inter-American literature and in the tradition of Spanish American poets addressing Whitman. Both Mir and Whitman have advanced American bardic verse—"American" in the original continental sense of the word denoting both North and South America.

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