
Muna Lee-Poet and Feminist of the Americas

Jonathan Cohen*¹

¹Stony Brook University – United States

Abstract

When Muna Lee died in Puerto Rico in 1965 at the age of seventy, the New York Times obituary extolled her achievements as a "poet, author, translator and lecturer" whose "works were published throughout North and South America," and as an "enthusiastic advocate" of women's rights and "exporter" of this cause. However, Lee's contributions to American literature and society have been overlooked for reasons largely due to the fragmented humanities of modern universities. While her glory days as a lyric poet were of another time, she left a compelling body of widely varied writing replete with lyricism, brilliance, and progressive ideas. Moreover, as the premier translator of Spanish-American poetry during the first half of the 20th century, she expanded the bounds of American literature by rendering in English the voices of more than sixty different poets, many of whom had not been known in the North until she introduced them. Her acclaimed translation of Ecuadorian poet Jorge Carrera Andrade's work, *Secret Country* (1946), was her greatest achievement. In order for us to fully appreciate our literary and social traditions, especially with regard to poetry and women's rights, we must come to terms with what she did to advance them; for she was one of the great Pan-American pioneers, who dedicated her life to finding our common ground with our sister republics, and bringing the diverse peoples of the Americas together, through literature, social change, and cultural relations. Ultimately, Muna Lee was not Mississippian, Oklahoman, or Puerto Rican, not simply North or South American, Latin or Anglo American, but American in the original sense of the word, which implies the hemispheric transnational vision that defined her. My presentation features documentary images/audio, and will elucidate Lee's life and achievements as a border-crossing American writer whose poetic and activist works merit renewed critical attention.

*Speaker