

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION TO SPANISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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Some of the very first explorers to come from Europe to the new World were black. One of Columbus' three vessels was piloted by a black man, Pedro Nino. Pizarro's "capellán" (chaplain) was a black priest. A black man, Nuflo de Olano, achieved the distinction of being one of the first non-Americans to reach the Pacific Ocean. In fact, blacks were an established minority in the social and cultural framework of the Iberian Peninsular by the time of the definitive contact between the Old and the New World.¹ The bald declaration of these facts, with the accompanying tone of revaluation, adequately sets the atmosphere for a topic such as ours. So much has been deliberately hidden or ignored that the student of African cultural connections, especially the literary ones, has the task of being first and foremost a revealer of the hidden. This paper will consequently take the form of, firstly, a panoramic view of the African literary connections in Spanish America. The panorama is more appropriately the fare of survey courses, but, unfortunately, in this area it is obligatory for all scholars. More in keeping with the researcher's need for profound contact with the issues, the second section of the paper attempts to identify, and then describe, a Spanish American Negritude.

Part One

From the very beginning of the colonial period in the Americas, the black man has been an important demographic factor. This, not only in those areas where today he is in the majority--primarily the regions washed by the waters of the Caribbean--but even in countries such as Argentina and Mexico, where there appears to be very little sign of his presence. By the middle of the sixteenth century, a little less than fifty years after the subjugation of the Mexican peoples, it is estimated that the non-native population of New Spain (as the country was then called) was composed of 18,569 blacks, 1,495 mulattoes, 2,415 *mestizos*, and 14,711 whites.² Around this same time the Viceroy of New Spain wrote the following interesting message to the King of Spain:

Vuestra Majestad mande que no se den tantas licencias para pasar negros, porque hay en esta Nueva España

*más de 20,000, y van en aumento, y tantos podrían ser que pusiesen la tierra en confusión.*³

Could your majesty please command that fewer permits be granted for the transporting of blacks, because in this New Spain there are already more than 20,000 of them and they are on the increase, and they could become so numerous as to put the place in confusion.

Not just in Mexico City, but even in the interior, blacks swelled the ranks of the population--the province of Sinaloa, from which most of the founding fathers of Los Angeles came, had a significant black population as reflected in the racial composition of these founding fathers.⁴ In Argentina, black slaves were present by 1570. The following are some revealing census figures for the diocese of Tucumán (in North West Argentina) in 1778, 34, whites, 35,254 Indians, 44,301 mulattoes, *zambo* (of black and Indian ancestry) and black Freedmen, 11,410 mulatto, *zambo* and black slaves. In a country like Puerto Rico, which sometimes in the minds of some people, may appear to have less African cultural connections than other Caribbean territories, it could be pointed out that a census of 1530 gave the white population to be 327 whereas the black was 3,830. In 1812, 52.03% of the population was black.⁵

Not all the black people in Spanish America came as slaves, although it must be conceded that the majority did, nor could all of them be called simply Africans since some came by way of the Iberian Peninsula perhaps after generations of separation from Africa. However, for our present purposes it is wiser not to dwell on the complexity and heterogeneity of the black population in Spanish America. It is beyond doubt that the overwhelming majority of this black population came to the New World with an exclusively African culture.

It is clear that from the very beginning, the Spanish American literary tradition has more or less excluded the African connection. There are many reasons for this. The principal one is that historically there has always been an attempt to keep the two cultures separate. Fanon speaks of the Manichean nature of the colonial situation, and the concept can be validly applied to the relationship between African cultural values and European ones in Spanish America.⁶ Also, the majority of the blacks were slaves or other deprived and persecuted people, not the usual reading public. There is, too, the real problem of the language barrier between the mainstream white population and the black (and others), who composed the "crude" majority--another aspect of the basic cultural separatism.

Spanish American literature is considered to begin with the various *Crónicas*⁷ (Chronicles), firsthand accounts of the

adventures of exploration and expropriation. Since some of these original adventurers were black, the chronicles can shed some light on the black man. However, following the usual pattern, very little study has been done so far on the subject of the image of the black man presented in these works—this is a task for the future.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695), the Mexican nun, is considered to be the most important literary figure in Colonial America. It is in her poetry that the first important sign of the African literary connection appears in mainstream Spanish American literature. A baroque artist, the only truly great one in Spanish America and the last of the important baroque poets of the Hispanic world, she followed the example of the Peninsular models, Gongora, Quevedo, Lope de Vega, among others, and tapped the aesthetic potential of the black experience.⁸ Her excursions into the black experience, as is the case with her models, are only a minor part of her work, but they are a significant manifestation of the African influence in literature.

The best way to gain some appreciation is through direct contact with her work. The following poem (written in 1677) is a *villancico*, a folk song on a religious theme generally, but not exclusively, associated with Christmas. It reads as follows:

*Villancico dedicado a San Pedro
Nolasco*

Un negro que entró en la iglesia
de su grandeza admirado,
por regocijar la fiesta,
cantó al son de un calabazo:

"Tumba, la, la, la! Tumba, le, le,
le! que donde ya Pilico esclava...
no quedé.

"Oy dici que en la Melcede
estos Parre Mercenaria
hace una fiesta a su Padle
Qué fiessa? Como su cala:
"Eya dici que ridimi.
Cosa palece encantada!
Porque yo la oblaje vivo!
Y los parre no mi saca!
La otra noche con mi conga
turo sin durmi pensaba
que no quiele gente plieta
como eya sô gente branca."

*Folk Song dedicated to St.
Peter Nolasco*

A black man, who entered the
church, marveling at its
great size, to celebrate the
feast day, sang this song
to the rhythm of a gourd.

I could not stay with Perico
in slavery

I heard it said that these
priests of the Merced Order
are celebrating the feast
day of their founder. What
kind of feast day is this?
They say that he ransomed
captives. What kind of a
fairy tale is that? Look,
I'm living in slavery and
no priests have come to res-
cue me. The other night as
I lay in bed with my black
woman I could not sleep a
wink for thinking that they

"Solo saco al Pañola,
pues Dioso! Mila la tlampa!
que aunque negla, gente somo,
aunque nos dici cabaya!

"Mas, qué digo? Diosa mío
los demonios que me engaña
pala que esté mulmulando
a esa Redentola casa.
El santo me lo perrone,
que só una malo hablala
que aunque padexca la cuepo
en ese, libla las almas."⁹

don't like black people, since
they're white folks. They only
ransom Spanish people, but, my
God, that's not fair because
though we're black, we are still
people, even though they call
horses. But what am I saying.
My God, the devils have deceived
me into this kind of murmuring
against this very house of the
saint. May he pardon my mutter-
ings, after all, this bodily suf-
fering is the soul's road to
liberation.

Certain characteristics are immediately recognizable. There are two kinds of Spanish. The first stanza is written in "standard" Spanish, whereas the rest of the poem is written in what could be called Afro-Spanish. This is more than just a haphazard attempt to depict stereotyped speech defects. Blacks who spoke Spanish as a second language made the inevitable adaptations of all non-native speakers. These variations from the "standard" had been widely used in Spanish literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the theatre (see Dunzo) and in poetry. The approximation to the black experience made by these white poets and playwrights is along the usual lines. They saw the rhythmic qualities of Afro-Spanish, they were attracted by the poetic sense of novelty exuded by the colourful speech of those exotic peoples. The repeated rhythmic line, "Tumba, la, la, etc. . ." is significant in this respect. "Tumba" probably refers to some kind of drum used by Afro-Mexicans, and the words "la, la, etc." are an onomatopoeic imitation of the drum rhythm. Lines of this type appear frequently in the Afro-Spanish area of sixteenth and seventeenth century Hispanic literature.

The poem is obviously written by the concerned kind of white, or more precisely nonblack, intellectual. The question of slavery and injustice is politely raised, and a convenient solution is quickly found through selective recourse to Christian dogma.

There is another kind of approach exemplified by a Cuban song called "Son de la Ma Teodora" (1568). This song reads:

-- Dónde está la ma Teodora?
-- Rajando la leña está.
-- Con su palo y su bandola?
-- Rajando la leña está.
-- Dónde está que no la veo?
-- Rajando la leña está.
-- Rajando la leña está.

-- Rajando la leña está.
-- Rajando la leña está.¹⁰

*Where is Ma Teodora? She's out splitting wood.
With her stick and her mandolin? She's out
splitting wood. Where is she, I don't see her?
She's out splitting wood. She's out splitting
wood, etc.*

Teodora Gines was a mulatto woman from Santiago, a well-known musician. The song evidences the acculturation process, the accommodating of the African heritage to the prevailing culture. Alejo Carpentier, a contemporary Cuban, renowned both as a musician and as a literary figure, says that in its musical form it is an *extremaduran romance*. However, the African cultural input is present in the call-response, antiphonal form, one that has helped to characterize the African style poem, from those written by Lope de Vega (in 16th Century Spain) to the blues, the calinda calypso, etc.

Some poems or popular songs that seem to be more truly authentic expressions of the African heritage have been documented. Valdés-Cruz, who in turn is quoting from Lydia Cabrera's *El monte*, reproduces some of these songs in her anthology, *La poesía negroide en América*. One of them reads as follows:

Rezo de mayombero

Prayer of the African Priest

Casimba yerē

Casimbangō

y salí de mi casa

Casimbangō

yo vengo a buscā

Dame sombra Ceibita

Ceiba da yo sombra,

Dame sombra palo Yaba

Dame sombra palo Caja...

yo vine a bucā...ll

I left my house,

I come seeking...

Give me shade, silk-cotton

Silk-cotton give me shade

Give me shade Yaba tree

Give me shade Caja tree

I have come seeking

This poem supposedly dates from the Seventeenth Century.

Another one of those songs unearthed by Cabrera is the following:

Solo--Aquí no hay visita, Kende Ayere!

Coro--Walo-Wila, Walo-Kende, Ayere Kende!

Solo--Quién es la visita, Kende Ayere?

Coro--Walo-Wile, Walo-Kende, Ayere Kende!

Solo--Compadre caballo, Kende Ayere!

Coro--Walo-Wila, Walo-Kende, Ayere Kende! 12

Here there is no visit, Kende Ayere!

Walo-Wila, etc.

Who's visiting, Kende Ayere?

Walo-Wila, etc.
 Brother horse, Kende Ayere!
 Walo-Wila, etc.

The formal aspect is the most interesting; the antiphonal st chant, with alternating response between chorus and lead sir Both poems contain some words that are not Spanish. They me either Yoruba, Hausa, Twi, or from some other of the many We African languages.

Ramón Guirao, in his important work *Orbita de la poes afrocubana*, 1928-37 cites the following "Canto de cabildo" (Meeting song):

Piquí, qiquimbín
 piquí, piquimbín
 tumba, muchacho
 yama, bo y tambó.
 Tambó, ta brabbo,
 tumbó, cajero
 jabla, mula.
 Piquí, piquimbín
 po, po, po, preca,
 preceta, pro, po.
 Cucha, cucha mi bo. (p. 3)13

The poem is composed mostly of non-Spanish words, some of the may be nonsense words used simply for the rhythmic effect—the line "Tumba la,la,la, etc." mentioned earlier. However, is very likely that they are meaningful words spoken in the Creole language during the Eighteenth century in Cuba.

In the Nineteen century the situation does not change. T was the period when Spanish America, through political indepe dence, took definite shape and cultural and social patterns t firm root. Latin American culture and society at all levels were profoundly influenced by the African cultural heritage. During this century there was an increased presence of Africa in Spanish American literature which of course still remained European style enterprise.

The first novel to be written in Spanish America is *El periquillo sarniento* (1816) the work of the Mexican Jose Joaqu Fernandez de Lizardi. In it there is some marginal presence blacks of the popular sectors of Mexico City's society. The final part of the book contains a convincing attack on slavery presented through the well reasoned, intelligent arguments of a noble black character.

Argentina's most important literary work of the Nineteen and perhaps of any century, is *Martin Fierro*, written by Jose

Hernández in 1872. The presence of blacks is fundamental to the development of the plot. It is a sort of novel written in regionalist verse, about the misadventures of a gaucho, a member of the lowest social class. The black characters, although grouped in this social class, are seen as arrogant folks with a deep sense of family solidarity, stout defenders of their dignity. The topics of a special black humour and knowledge, the namelessness of the black man, his whole situation in a white society are broached, showing Hernández' real understanding of the black man's condition—as indeed that of the poor white. However, for all this, blacks are still men labouring under the handicap of their colour, one that is clearly called the "humilde (humble) color." Neither for the poor white nor the black man does the author (a confirmed bourgeois) propose any basic change.

The widely read Colombian novel *María*, written by Jorge Isaacs in 1867, is certainly Spanish America's most famous romantic novel. Here, too, blacks are present. In fact, there is a long interlude telling the story of a "nanny," Felicianita, who once was a happy princess in far-off fanciful Africa. The story is full of typical romantic motifs. The sadness it evokes, like the benevolence the author displays for blacks, never goes beyond the comfortable realm of literature. It is not incompatible with unflattering *a priori* generalizations about blacks. He speaks of the "sudor peculiar de la raza" (the peculiar sweat of the race). The black servants are faithful and loveable, but stupid. There is no real appreciation of the black man's physical beauty, it is always judged in relation to white standards. In this respect the novel is similar to the antislavery novels.

Blacks are, of course, supposedly the subjects of these antislavery novels that appeared in the Nineteenth century. The most famous ones are: *Francisco or The Delights of Country Life*, by Anselmo Suárez Romero (written in 1839, but not published till 1880), *Cecilia Valdez*, written by Cirilo Villaverde in 1839, and *Sab*, written by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda in 1840. These books, all written by white men, reflect the shortcomings of the romantic period. The very term "antislavery novel" indicates what is to be expected: mainly literary interest in a theme rich in aesthetic potential.¹⁴

A more significant work of the same theme is *Coloured Poets* by Francisco Calcagno, written between 1868 and 1887. It is made up of the biographies of four black poets, all born into slavery; Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (known simply as Plácido), Agustín Baldomero Rodríguez, Antonio Medina and Juan Francisco Manzano. This introduces another aspect of black experience. There is hardly a line in the works of these black men that would indicate their situation. Plácido, at least, earned the distinction of political martyrdom, although he seems to have been a weak corrupt man.¹⁵ A sample of Manzano's verse would serve to

illustrate the point:

*La tierra juvenil, hermosa frente
cual nítida amapola, los cabellos
de ébano lustroso perfumado
las mejillas de rosas y violetas
los negros ojos y purpúreos labios
el aire fino de garboso talle
que ostentaba en su andar nada lascivo,
en un rincón de Cuba me ofrecían
un ser divino bajo humana forma.¹⁶*

The soft young beautiful forehead like a bright poppy, the hair of lustrous perfumed ebony, the rose cheeks of violet hue, the black eyes and purple lips, the refined air of the graceful waist which showed no signs of lasciviousness in her walk; all this I found in a divine being in human form in some remote corner of Cuba.

The ideal woman he is describing here is not clearly white, neither is she clearly black. In part of another poem the poet says:

*Cuando miro el espacio que he corrido
desde la cuna hasta el presente día
tiemblo, y saludo a la fortuna mía
más de terror que de atención movida.¹⁷*

When I look at the course my life has taken from the cradle to the present moment, I tremble, and greet my destiny with feelings more of terror than of interest.

These lines ring out as a possible reference to the horrible situation of the black slave and even of the freedman. However, the language is nothing more than a copy of the European romantics' laments, which were mostly about not being born under the right star for some particular lady. What we have here is European poetry written by men whose skins and human situations were clamorously black.

Ricardo Palma (the Peruvian) is one of the most important literary figures of the late 19th and early 20th century. He was nonwhite, but it did not show too much. The point has been made that the peculiar psychological problems occasioned by his situation as a mulatto might have accounted for his particular style, one of bitter, sharply humorous irony. For him, blackness was a deeply personal interior problem, but evidently African literary values would only be present very accidentally in his works.

The Twentieth Century brought a new wave of cultural self-assertion in Spanish America, again, to the exclusion of blacks. The great Modernist movement was an affair of the white elite--Rubén Darío spoke quite naturally of his "manos de marques" (Marquis' hands) spiced with a few token drops of African blood. In fact, many of the early 20th century philosophers who engaged in the then topical national self-analysis attributed Latin America's "backwardness" to its dosages of black and native American blood. However, it soon became the fashion to rethink this position and to take a closer look at the Indians. Around this same time, the wave of interest in things black that had swept across Europe and the United States, finally made its way to Spanish America.

In 1926, Pales Matos, a Puerto Rican white man, wrote the first of the Afro-Antillean poems, "Pueblo negro." His example was followed shortly afterwards by the Cubans, Ramón Guirao, Emilio Ballagas, José Z. Tallet, and Alejo Carpentier, also white. Their works became the rage. Like their European models, these poets have an anthropological basis to their aesthetic approach to Africa. The lines of approach are the standard ones, reflected in the themes of the poems, dancing, singing, rhythm, black primitivism in its exotic and erotic dimensions. Pales Matos, for whom this poetic style is only a part of his total work, has a vision of the black situation that is basically similar to that presented by the vast majority of those who have spoken on the subject, from Sor Juana to Senghor (to pick two names at random): the idea of the vocation, the idea of the special ways of knowing, the idea of the homogeneity of black culture. He is the first poet to see the cultural unity of the West Indies, fragmented by the forces of colonial domination but sharing a common African culture. However, behind all this there lurks a spirit that is profoundly inimical to the black man.

His poem "Ten con Ten" (A kind of dance), for example, presents the dual founts of Puerto Rican--and West Indian--culture; Africa and Europe. Consider the following verse:

*Pasarías ante el mundo
por civil y ciudadana,
si tu axila--flor de sombra--
no difundiera en las plazas
el rugiente cebollín
que sofrien tus entrañas.*¹⁸

*You could pass as civilized and urbane in the world's
eyes if your underarm did not give off that strong smell of
onions sauted in your insides.*

In these lines, as throughout his verse, he does little to hide his insulting misconceptions about blacks. And here, too, he follows the general lines of the stereotypes; in this instance, it is the distinctive "Negro" smell. Elsewhere in his pivotal work "Pueblo negro," he speaks of: "Es la negra que canta/su sobria vida de animal doméstico/La negra de las zonas soleadas/que huele a tierra, a salvajina, a sexo."¹⁹ (It is the black woman who sings away her sober life of a domestic animal. The black woman of the sun-drenched lands, with her savage smell of earth and sex). In "Elegia del duque de la mermelada," he pokes fun at the Haitian blacks for not being true to their African civilization. It is an African heritage conceived of in the same insulting terms:

*Oh, mi fino, mi melado Duque de la Mermelada!
 Donde están tus caimanes en el lejano aduar del Pongo,
 y la sombra azul y redonda de tus baobabs africanos
 y tus quince mujeres olorosas a selva y a fango?*²⁰

*Oh my fine and honeyed Duke of Marmalade! Where are
 your crocodiles in those far-off Pongo villages,
 and the full blue shadow of your African baobabs, and
 your fifteen women smelling of the dank jungle?*

The spirit of approximation to African culture displayed by all the poets of this school was one that encouraged the use of the *jitanjáfora*. This was a nonsense word with rhythmic value, which they used lavishly to give that "African" touch to their poetry. They saw that the most authentic expressions of the African cultural heritage had included strange non-Spanish words. They realized that a special emphasis on rhythm seemed to characterize African and neo-African art. They realized too that in speech as well as in song and verse the onomatopoeic possibilities of language are frequently exploited by Africans and neo-Africans.

The main contribution of the Afro-Antilleans was in poetry. However, there have been some novels that are worthy of consideration. Alejo Carpentier's *Ecúé-Yamba-O*, although it is no longer read, is one of the pioneer works—it was written in 1931. His later work *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of the Earth*) is of a similar theme, and is a better novel. It deals with the marvelous life and works of the legendary Makandal, a Haitian slave leader. The book was published in 1949. *Matalaché* (written in 1924), by the Peruvian Enrique López Albújar, and *Pobre negro*, written by the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos in 1937 can be considered to be related to this same trend. Perhaps the most significant Afro-Antillean novel is *Juyungo*, written by the Ecuadorian Adalberto Ortiz, a mulatto, in 1942. The hero Asencio Lastre, a poor black man, grows from the extreme position of hatred for all white people to one of hatred for injustice.

His contact with a revolutionary mulatto intellectual and his love for a white woman are the two factors that are most influential in the evolution of his attitudes. The novelist describes Lastre's initial sentiments thus: "Lastre deseaba a esta mujer, más que nada, porque era blanca, con una voluntad de humillarla sexualmente con sentimientos contradictorios."²¹ (Lastre desired this woman most of all because she was white. He wanted to humiliate her sexually, his sentiments were contradictory). The contradictions are resolved through his new class oriented view of society. The novelist displays a deep understanding of and identification with the black man. His approach is thus not the lopsided one of the typical Afro-Antillean. However, one feels that the solutions he offers are somewhat simplistic.

Part Two

If there does exist a Spanish American Negritude, the best example of it would be found in the works of Nicolás Guillén. Guillén was born of two generations of mulattoes in Cuba in 1902, the son of a respectable but poor household. His father, who was a national senator for four years, was assassinated by soldiers during one of the frequent civil disturbances of the period—1917—and Nicolás understandably kept away from politics for a long time. He began his poetic career like all other Spanish American poets, following the currents of the mainstream—in his case, a late Modernism. In 1930, at the height of the Afro ferment, his collection of eight short poems called *Motivos de son* were an instant success.

The name *son* stands for many things (recall the "Son de la Ma Teodora"). Around the 1920's, a kind of song and dance, developed by black Cubans and generally circumscribed to their immediate circles, began to reach the mainstream of Cuban life. They were received with great acclaim. This new music was called the *son*. It is a truly neo-African music, strong in rhythm, sung by a lead singer and chorus, with those nasal qualities that to the casual observer seem basic to African songs. The *son* has, of course, evolved over the years, but the *sones* that are popular today are still very similar to those of the 1920's. Today's *son* belongs to the same genre as the other kinds of songs and dances normally designated as "Latin" music, rumba, cha cha cha, guaguanco, etc. The most fascinating aspects of the 1920 *son* was the rhythm section used by the exponents of the music. Guillén has indicated that his poems were written in an attempt to bring to Spanish verse the verbal rhythms of the *son*. He also indicated that his most important influences were the Sexteto Habanero and the Trio los Matamoros, two of the most famous *son* groups of the period. After years of approximations of varying degrees of success, a poet had decided to and was successful in wedding African poetic traditions to European (Hispanic) ones.

The actual technique of Guillén's *son* poems has not as yet been adequately described by those who specialize in poetic analysis. Senghor has described African and neo-African poetic rhythm as vital and vigorous, one achieved mostly by "unité dans la diversité" (unity in diversity). By this formula he draws attention to the special role that repetition plays. He also speaks of the "sens" (sense) aspect that is given prominence in the language of neo-African poetry, as distinct from the "signe" (sign/meaning) aspect. This, of course, is the kind of insight that leads the Afro-Antilleans to the abuse of the *jitanjáfora*. In some of Guillén's best poems invented words are used to heighten the rhythmic effect. However, these words are used with discretion, and they have an authentic ring to them in that they resemble the many words, of Yoruba and other origin, that survive today in Cuban speech and especially in religious and semi-religious songs. "Sensemayá," the title of one of his poems is a good example; it is quite close to "Yemayá," the Yoruba name of Shango's mother.

Guillén's *son* poems imitate the structure of the *son* song. There is an introductory *largo*, which succinctly states the subject matter. This is followed by the *montuno*, an antiphonal exchange between lead singer and chorus in which the matter stated in the *largo* is further developed and resolved. The chorus line is repeated; it is a perfect example of the use of repetition to create the intense rhythm that characterizes neo-African song, poetry and art in general. The *son* songs are truly popular, as are Guillén's *son* poems. They deal with the day to day life of black people. They are witty and philosophical and as black and other Cubans do, make use of variations from "standard" Spanish.

The original *son* poem is "Negro bembón." It reads as follows:

*Por qué te pone tan bravo,
cuando te dicen negro bembón
si tiene la boca santa,
negro bembón?*

*Bembón así como ere
tiene de to;
Caridad te mantiene,
te lo da to.*

*Te queja todavía,
negro bembón;
sin pega y con harina,
negro bembón. . . ,
majagua de dril blanco,
negro bembón; 22*

Why do you get so angry when they call you "negro bembón," if your mouth is in fact a real black mouth, "negro bembón." Bembón and all as you are, you have all you need. Caridad is keeping you, she gives you everything. You still complain, negro bembón; you have no job but yet you have money, "negro bembón," a white drill suit, "negro bembón;"

The son poems are the beginning of Guillén's poetic greatness. One that he achieved by full acceptance of himself as a son of Africa as well as being a cultural son of Europe, too. Unlike Plácido, Manzano, Ricardo Palma and the other black-skinned poets, he declares his blackness in his art. Unlike Sor Juana, the authors of the antislavery novel and the scores of "concerned" white humanists and artists, he has tasted the condemnation of being black. Unlike the majority of the Afro-Antilleans he is realistically committed to his people. His art is meaningfully related to his total commitment to justice. In Fanon's language, his poetry "takes its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom."²³ Some excerpts from the poem "Sabás" from the book *West Indies Ltd* written in 1934, will give some idea of this aspect of Guillén:

*Yo vi a Sabás, el negro sin veneno,
pedir su pan de puerta en puerta.
Por qué, Sabás, la mano abierta?
(Este Sabás es un negro bueno.)*

.....

*Coge tu pan, pero no lo pidas;
coge tu luz, coge tu esperanza cierta
como a un caballo por las bridas.
Plántate en medio de la puerta,
pero no con la mano abierta,
ni con tu cordura de loco;
aunque te dan el pan, el pan es poco,
y menos ese pan de puerta en puerta.*

.....

*Caramba, Sabás, no seas tan loco!
Sabás, no seas tan bruto,
ni tan bueno! ²⁴*

I saw Sabas, the innocuous Negro, begging his bread from door to door. Why, Sabás, the open hand? This Sabás is a good Negro. . . Go out and get your bread don't just beg for it; go out and get your light, your hope, grab them by the bridle as you would a horse. Plant yourself squarely in the door, but not with an outstretched hand nor with good behavior

one could only expect of a madman; even if they do give you some bread, what is a little bread, especially this bread you have to beg from door to door. . . Goodness, Sabás, don't be so crazy! Sabás don't be so stupid, don't be so good!

This sense of identification is a necessary prerequisite for any truly authentic expression of the African heritage. It is the same sense of honesty that one finds in Regino Pedroso, a black Cuban poet, a contemporary of Guillén, and to some extent in Marcelino Arozarena, another black Cuban poet of the same period. Other black writers throughout Spanish America have, recent times, begun to demonstrate a similar spirit of commitment both to their art and to their African heritage. They are men like the Panamanian Joaquín Beleño, author of *Gamboa Road Gang* or *Los forzados de Gamboa* (1960); or like the Ecuadorian Nelson Estupiñán Bass, also a novelist and author of *El último río* (*The Last River*) (1967); or the Puerto Rican Francisco Arriví, playwright and author of *Vejigantes*, *Sirena* and *Medusas en la bahía*, works in which he attempts to kindle a respect for and concern with the African heritage. Intellectuals like the Puerto Rican Isabelo Zenón Cruz also contribute considerably to the recognition of African influenced literary values in Spanish America.

In Guillén's work, then, Africa's influence is most strongly felt. Senghor, Césaire, Damas, even Jahn, etc., have posited the existence of a peculiarly African epistemology. They have seen this as an aspect of the African and neo-African special identification with nature. It is expressed through a tendency to humanize nature, a tendency that this would give a special flavour to poetic images. It is one that Palés Matos understood well and that accounts for some of Guillén's peculiar style. The image "caña" (sugar cane) is central to Guillén's poetry. This image, so particularly apt as a symbol in a Cuban poet, profits a great deal from the poet's African view of the world. The poem "Caña" gives eloquent testimony:

*El negro
junto al cañaveral.*

*El yanqui
sobre el cañaveral.*

*La tierra
bajo el cañaveral.*

*Sangre
que se nos va!* 25

*The black man next to the cane field. The Yankee
on top of the cane field. The land below the cane
field. Our blood oozes away.*

The stark beauty of the poem is heightened by the sense of identification between the black man and the cane field, and by the fact that the blood that is sucked away is poetically as much from human beings as from the cane fields. "Mujer nueva" ("New woman"), a poem which proclaims the beauty of the black woman, presents images that are based on the same principle of humanization. In this case it sees the woman as an integral part of nature. Poems like "Acana" (names of a tree) and "Ebano real" (Royal Ebony), whose subject matter is trees, evidently benefit from this process.

Humour, which in Senghor's eyes is for the neo-African and African always a "réaction vécue" (lived reaction), has been seen by almost everyone to be specially related to the African heritage. Many, of course, have been unflattering in their appraisal of the black man's "grin." Like the sense of vocation posited by the Négritude thinkers of the African's congenital primitivism and savagery, this supposed characteristic has its two sides. Humour is an important aspect of Guillén's style, as it was of Palma's. It has almost always been an important aspect of all the approximations to African culture, it is an important aspect of the *son*--both the popular song and Guillén's poetic invention. Guillén's first *son*--"Negro bombón" raises an interesting point. "Bemba" (a word of obvious West African coinage) is used in Spanish to refer to the black man's thick lips. "Bombón" is the corresponding adjective, and, naturally, has pejorative overtones. It seems that Guillén's humorous use of concepts like "bombón" had behind it a therapeutic intent to purge his listeners of their ridiculous self-image. Guillén has said in another poem: "la risa es salud" (laughter is health-giving). This is the key to the understanding of his humour, as it seems to be of the other manifestations of humor in neo-African art.

In its themes and subject matter Guillén's art displays its African heritage. From the point of view of structure and form, as was already indicated, Guillén, listening to the voice emanating from the heart of the neo-African Cuban folk, invented a new poetic form, the *son*. After meeting Langston Hughes in 1930, Guillén seems to have been deeply impressed with the former's desire to be the voice of the common black folk. This corresponded to a deeply felt need in Guillén, one that he had expressed, perhaps indirectly and subconsciously as poets are wont to do, in an earlier poem, "Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano" (Little Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer):

*lucirse negro mientras aplaude el bulevar,
y frente a la envidia de los blancos
hablar en negro de verdad* 26

*(displaying all my blackness to the applause of the
boulevard, and to the envy of the white folks,
speaking like a true black man)*

The original *son* poems are written in imitation of the speech of black Cubans; and perhaps this was one of the ways to "hablar en negro de verdad." However, his fellow black Cubans saw this as yet another form of discrimination. They sensed that the whole meaning of "dialect" verse had been an attempt to ridicule blacks. Their intuition was probably correct in part. Even though the dialect verse of Sor Juana, Góngora, etc., may have originated in the poets' legitimate and imperious need to do new things with language, they met this need without too much respect for blacks in general. Certainly the Afro-Antilleans, whose verses were uppermost in the minds of the protesters, were even less respectful of blacks. In view of all this, Guillén's black contemporaries could not see his "dialect" verse as an attempt to create a beautiful monument to the black experience, to overcome that "décalage léger et constant qui sépare ce qu'il dit de ce qu'il voudrait dire, dès qu'il parle de lui," (thin persistent veil that stands between what he actually says and what he really means to say as soon as he begins to talk about himself) of which Sartre speaks. Guillén must not have been too sure of himself since he yielded and never again uses this manner of "hablar en negro de verdad." It might be pointed out that the more contemporary Anglophone West Indian poets have been using "dialect" verse. A rare opportunity was thus lost, for although other poets have used this kind of verse in Spanish, none are of Guillén's calibre.

Walterio Carbonell, a black Cuban critic, has accused Guillén of betraying the promise held out by his first good poems. He claims that Guillén did not delve deeply enough into the fullness of the black experience. Guillén, asked recently to state his views on Negritude, said among other things: "Era una de las manifestaciones de la lucha de clases. Pero cuando una revolución borra esa lucha y de el poder a la clase obrera sin tener en cuenta el color de la piel, ese concepto de superioridad o de diferenciación racial deja de existir."²⁷ (It was one of the manifestations of the class struggle. But when a revolution eliminates this struggle and gives power to the working class without any considerations of skin colour, that concept of superiority of differentiation of races ceases to exist). It is the reply of a good communist, who is also the Poeta Nacional (National Poet) of Castro's Cuba. At least Guillén has been consistent. He has never claimed to be a poet of Negritude. From the very beginning he saw his art as "mulat

and Cuban. He defines "mulatto" as a synthesis of African and European, a synthesis which is equally respectful of the two components. His position is thus one that goes beyond Negritude, or maybe, one that betrays Negritude. It is in Haiti that, in Césaire's poetic view, Negritude first rose to its feet. It is apt that Spanish America's best expression of Negritude should arise from the neighboring island of Cuba. It is stimulating, and in this respect poignantly poetic, that this expression of Negritude never declared itself to be exclusively African. Cuba holds the possible solution to many Latin American dilemmas. The field of race relations is one in which Cuba could provide a real answer. Time will tell.

Negritude or the cultural contribution of Africa has been a driving force in Spanish American life from the very moment that "Spanish America" came into being. Literature reflects man's total experience. Consequently, Spanish American literature should reflect the strong indebtedness of Spanish American culture to African culture. It does indeed do so. Up to now this reflection has been barely visible. This paper has scratched the surface and revealed some of the hidden founts of African influence. There are many more waiting to be revealed.

Footnotes

1. Dunzo, Annette Ivory. *Black of Sub-Saharan Origin in Spain: Image in Theatre*. UCLA Diss., 1974. Here, it is stated that there was, as early as 1472, a medieval "confradía" (guild) organized exclusively by blacks and limited in membership to them. The important Spanish work *El Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) presents a black character. There are of course several similar facts that could be mentioned.
2. Rosenblat, Angel. *La población indígena y el mestizaje en America* (Buenos Aires) Nova, 1954, p. 242.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
4. Weathersax, John M. *The Founders of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles) Bryant Foundation, 1954. Twenty-six of the original pobladores colonists were black.
5. Rosenblat, Angel, *op. cit.* These scanty facts about the demographic makeup of colonial America are meant as mere indications for the purpose of arousing interest. A more thorough analysis is obviously needed, but cannot be presented here.
6. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Suffolk) Penguin, 1967. On pages 31 and 32 he says:

*The colonial world is a Manichean World. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil.**

*We have demonstrated the mechanism of this Manichean World in *Peau noire, Masques blancs*, Editions du Seuil.

7. To this genre would belong works like Christopher Columbus' *Letters*. Bartolomé de las Casas' *History of the Indies* (*Historia de las Indias*) written between 1527 and 1566, or, Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo's *Summary of the Natural History of the Indies* (*Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias*) published 1526. etc.
8. Dunzo, Annette Ivory, *op. cit.* In her thesis, Dunzo has unearthed the little known facts about the important contribution and presence of blacks in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Spanish literature.
9. Valdés-Cruz, Rosa E. *La poesía negroide en América*. (New York) Las Americas, 1970, p. 35.
10. Carpentier, Alejo. *La música en Cuba*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946, p. 39.
11. Valdez, Cruz, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
12. Carpentier, Alejo, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
13. Guirao, Ramon. *Orbita de la poesía afro-Cubana, 1928-37*, (Habana) Ucar, Garcia y Cpia, 1938, p. 3
14. Coulthand, George R. *Race and colour in Caribbean Literature* (London) Oxford University Press, 1962; and Jackson, Richard L. "Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish American Literature," *Hispania*, 58, No. 3, September 75, pp. 467-480
15. Fernandez de Castro, José A. "El aporte negro de las letras de Cuba en el siglo XIX," *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, 38, No. 1, 1936, pp. 46-66. On page 5, he states "Plácido was incapable of taking part in any serious undertaking. He was perfectly at home in that corrupt society." Fernandez de Castro is, of course, referring to the conspiracy of which Plácido was falsely accused.
16. Guirao, Ramon. *op. cit.*, p. 38.

17. *Ibid.*
18. Valdés-Cruz, p. 165.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
21. Ortiz, Adalberto. *Juyungo* (Guayaquil: Librería Cervantes, 1942), pp. 65-66.
22. Guillén, Nicolás. *Sóngoro Cosongo* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967) p. 39.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
26. Morejón, Nancy. et al. "Conversación con Nicolás Guillén." *Casa de las Americas*. 12, No. 73 (1972), p. 129.

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