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## THE BLACK POETRY OF NICOLÁS GUILLÉN AND JORGE DE LIMA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Earl E. Fitz

Nicolás Guillén (b. 1944) has long been hailed as the principal force behind the Afro-Cuban movement in Spanish American literature. One of the most engaging poets in Latin America, Guillén is a master at employing verbal rhythms which are often alien to the Spanish language. Typically, he emphasizes the spoken mode of poetry and utilizes a heavily African vocabulary in his refrains. Spanish versification, which traditionally has rested upon rules of syllabication, is supplanted in Guillén's poetry in favor of the speech patterns and linguistic habits of the Cuban people, the rhythms of folk ballads, and the lexicons of Africa.

A contemporary of Guillén (who, like Guillén, is a mulatto) and another outstanding proponent of Afro-Americanism in literature is the Brazilian Jorge De Lima (1893-1953). In Brazil, a nation whose history has included an extensive, though sometimes subdued Negro literature, and which has recently shown a new awareness of its African roots, it has been poetry more than prose that has carried the banner of Black awareness.<sup>1</sup> And among all of Brazil's gifted Negro and mulatto poets, Jorge de Lima has gained fame as the greatest of these writers. Like Guillén, Lima makes use of traditional folk rhythms and ballads while also working pure Africanisms into his poetic diction. Both Guillén and Lima indulge in a demotic language that is incantatory in its sonority and repetitiveness. Yet their poetry is often exotic or picturesque in its imagery even while sounding a note of protest against the suffering and exploitation of black men and women in Brazil and Cuba. The Brazilian poet's sense of Black awareness, however, is tied directly to his nation's Modernismo movement, which dates from the Semana de Arte Moderna in February of 1922. Although there was already a "Negro literature" in the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1920's that there appeared in Latin America a literature which depicted Negro values as being superior to those of the white populace.<sup>2</sup> Seen in this context, both Lima and Guillén are attempting to return to one of the deepest roots of their respective ethnic backgrounds. By writing a type of poetry which fosters and encourages a sense of racial pride and sociopolitical awareness, both Nicolás Guillén and Jorge de Lima are attempting to give artistic form to the extensive role played by Negroes and mulattoes in the culture of Latin America.

Both these poets go beyond the early forms of Afro-American poetry, the mere repetition of African words and the depiction of voluptuous,

hip-swaying black women; they become artistic interpreters of Negro dialects, speech and dance rhythms, and social attitudes. Guillén, for example, makes this manifest in his first volume of verse, *Motivos de Són* (1930). These poems, which represent life as the *black* man and woman in Cuba live it, emphasize a colloquial language that is rich in the color, sound, and vitality of non-white Cuba. We see both the old pre-slavery Africa, with its proud, free people, and the New World Negro with all of his poverty, exploitation, and enslavement. Two examples of the "són," a type of popular song and dance of which there are many examples in *Motivos de Són*, are "Negro Bembón":

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

Te queja todavía, negro  
bembón; sin pega y con  
harina, negro bembón,  
majagua de aril blanco,  
negro bembón; zapato de  
do tono, negro bembón. . .<sup>3</sup>

and "Mulata":

Tanto tren con tu cuerpo,  
tanto tren;  
tanto tren con tu boca,  
tanto tren;  
tanto tren con tu sojo,  
tanto tren.

Si tú supiera, mulata, la  
verdá;  
¡qué yo con mi negra tengo,  
y no te quiere pa na.<sup>4</sup>

But in the early "negrista" poetry of Jorge de Lima we see the same usage of African lore, folk poetry, and popular speech patterns. In *Essa Negra Fulô* (1928), a work which is widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of Afro-Brazilian literature, we witness the unfolding of a sexual encounter between the races which has had profound significance for all of Brazilian culture. In fact, the subject of this poem, in its larger sociological context,

has been thoroughly discussed by Gilberto Freyre in his famous *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933). As Lima writes:

Ora, se deu que chegou (isso  
já faz muito tempo) no  
banguê dum meu avô urna  
negra bonitinha chamada  
negra Fulô.

Essa negra Fulô!  
Essa negra Fulô!

Ó Fulô! Ó Fulô! (era a fala  
da Sinhá.) Vai forrar a minha  
cama, pentear os meus  
câbelos, vem ajudar a tirar a  
minha roupa Fulô!

Essa negra Fulô!

O Sinhô foi ver a negra  
levar couro do feitor. A  
negra tirou a roupa.

O Sinhô foi açoitar  
sôzinho a negra Fulô. A  
negra tirou a saia e tirou  
o cabeçao, d dentro dele  
pulou nuinha a negra  
Fulô.

Essa negra Fulô!  
Essa negra Fulô!

Ó Fulô? Ó Fulô?  
Cadê, cadê teu Sinhô  
que nosso Senhor me mandou?  
Ah! foi voce que roubou,  
foi voce, negra Fulô? <sup>5</sup>

So Jorge de Lima, always concerned with the individual Negro soul, with his sense of self-identity and ethnic awareness:<sup>6</sup> is also deeply aware of the need to call for a more general recognition of the profound role African slaves have played in the development of Brazilian civilization. In "Ancila Negra," for example, we read:

Há muita coisa a recalcar, Celidonia,  
ó linda moleca ioruba que embalou  
minha rêde, me acompanhou para a  
escola, me contou histórias de  
bichos quando eu era pequeno,  
muito pequeno mesmo.<sup>7</sup>

Both the Cuban and the Brazilian, moreover, are deeply concerned with the political status of black people in their respective countries. Guillén, long noted for the presence of overt social protest in his work, identifies closely with the common black laborers that populate his homeland. In *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931) and *West Indies Ltd.* (1934), for example, Guillén protests against economic exploitation and the racist social order that supports it. As Ezequiel Martínez Estrada has written:

Toda la poesía de Guillén . . . se inspira en el lema que resume los derechos del hombre y del ciudadano: Libertad, igualdad y fraternidad. Su obra es combate contra la opresión, los privilegios y la rivalidad . . .<sup>8</sup>

In "Caña," Guillén writes:

El negro  
junto al cañaverál.

El yanqui  
sobre el cañaverál.

La tierra  
bajo el cañaverál.

¡ Sangre  
que se nos va! <sup>9</sup>

And in "Balada de los dos Abuelos," he indicts an entire social and economic system:

Qué de barcos, qué de barcos! Qué  
de negros, qué de negros! Qué  
largo fulgor de cañas! Qué látigo  
el del negrero!

Piedra de llanto y de sangre,  
venas y ojos entreabiertos, y  
madrugadas vacías, y atardeceres  
de ingenio, y una gran voz, fuerte  
voz despedazando el silencio.  
¡Qué de barcos, qué de barcos,  
qué de negros! <sup>10</sup>

Similarly Jorge de Lima is acutely aware of the Negro's inferior social and economic status in his own country, Brazil. Though better known as the poet of the individual Negro consciousness, of doing for Black awareness in poetry something similar to what José Lina do Rêgo and Jorge Amado did for the Negro in prose fiction with their novels *O Moleque Ricardo* (1935) and *Jubiabá* (1935), Jorge de Lima often succeeds in painting a poetic portrait of economic and social serfdom. In one of his finest poems, "Pai Joao," the poet successfully combines two seemingly disparate elements — the social and economic ramifications of slavery as an institution and the noble, even morally superior, spirit of the downtrodden black populace. As Cipriano Vitureira observes, noting the sociological appeal of the titular subject of this poem, "No es un hombre solo, ni como tal está tratado; es una clase social .... Hacia el final del poema, en la sombra general, asoma el sentido mágico de inspiración racial." <sup>11</sup> As Lima presents it:

Pai Joao secou como um pau sem raiz. —  
Pai Joao vai morrer. Pai Joao  
remou nas canoas. —  
Cavou a terra.  
Fez brotar de chao a esmeralda,  
Das fôlhas — café, cana, algodao.  
Pai Joao cavou mais esmeraldas,  
Que Pais Leme. A filha de Pai Joao  
tinha um peito de  
Turinha para os filhos de Ioiô mamar:  
Quando o peito secou a filha de Pai Joao  
Também secou agarrada num  
Ferro de engomar.  
A pele de Pai Joao ficou na ponta  
Dos chicotes.  
A forza de Pai Joao ficou no cabo  
Da enxada e da foice.  
A mulher de Pai Joao o branco  
A roubou para fazer mucamas. O sangue de Pai  
Joao se sumiu no sangue bom  
Como um torrao de açúcar bruto  
Numa panela de leite. —

Pai Joao foi cavalo para os filhos de Ioiô montar.  
Pai Joao sabia histórias tao bonitas que  
Davam vontade de chorar.  
Pai Joao vai morrer.  
Há urna noite là fora como a pele de Pai Joao.  
Nem uma estrêla no ceu.  
Parece até mandinga de Pai Joao.<sup>12</sup>

And in *Poemas Negros* (1947), the Brazilian poet again points to his country's African heritage with pride; like Nicolás Guillén, he rejects the taint of a supposed racial and cultural inferiority. Both poets strive to link the culture of Africa to their respective countries by enumerating African deities and by depicting the double curse of the Negro in America — his loss of cultural identity through systematic enslavement and his concomitant economic exploitation. But Guillén, like Jorge de Lima, is also fully capable of focusing his attention on a single human soul rather than on an entire race. In "Velorio de Papá Montero," he writes:

¡Ahora sí que te rompieron,  
Papá Montero! En el solar  
esperaban, pero te trajeron  
muerto; fue bronca de jaladera,  
pero te trajeron muerto; dicen  
que él era tu ecobio, pero te  
trajeron muerto; el hierro no  
apareció, pero te trajeron  
muerto.

Ya se acabó Baldomero: ¡zumba,  
canalla y rumbero! Sólo dos velas  
están quemando un poco de sombra;  
para tu pequeña muerte con esas dos  
velas sobra. Y aun te alumbran, más  
que velas, la camisa colorada que  
iluminó tus canciones, la prieta sal  
de tus sonos, y tu melena planchada.

¡Ahora sí que te rompieron,  
Papá Montero!<sup>13</sup>

Both Guillén and Lima consistently shift the focus of their attention from the collective to the individual. This helps give their work sociological

breadth as well as psychological depth. But regardless of the focus, both poets show similar thematic concerns. One of the most striking of these similarities (and a quality which links the work of each of these poets to the best of Black poetry in other Latin American countries) is the evocation of an African mythos. Guillén, for example, conjures up the hypnotic aura of a traditional African legend with his famous poem "Sensemaya":

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
May ombe-bombe-may ombé!

La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio; La  
culebra viene y se enreda en un palo; con sus  
ojos de vidrio, en un palo, con sus ojos de  
vidrio.

La culebra camina sin patas; La  
culebra se esconde en la yerba;  
caminando se esconde en la yerba,  
caminando sin patas.

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé !  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé! <sup>14</sup>

Another of his poems in this same category is "Balada del Güije" (the Güije is a malevolent African water deity):

¡Ñeque, que se vaya el ñeque!  
¡Güije, que se vaya el güije!

Las turbias aguas del río son  
hondas y tienen muertos;  
carapachos de tortuga, cabezas  
de niños negros. De noche saca  
sus brazos el río, y rasga el  
silencio con sus uñas, que son  
uñas de cocodrilo frenético.  
Bajo el grito de los astros, bajo  
una luna de incendio, ladra el  
río entre las piedras y con  
invisibles dedos, sacude el arco  
del puente y estrangula a los  
viajeros.



¡Ñeque, que se vaya el ñeque!  
¡Güije, que se vaya el güije!<sup>15</sup>

Jorge de Lima can likewise evoke memories of a deeply felt African legacy. As he writes in "Exu comeu tarubá," from *Poemas Negros*:

O ar estava duro, gordo, oleoso:  
a negra dentro da madorna;  
e dentro da madorna — bruxas desenterradas.  
No chao urna urupema com os cabelos da môça.  
Foi entao que Exu comeu tarubá  
e meteu a figa na mixira de peixe-boi.  
Ai na distancia sem fim, môças foram roubadas,  
e sóror Adelaide veio viajando de rede,  
era alva ficou negra, era santa ficou lesa:  
caiu na madorna, o ar duro, gordo, oleoso.  
Exu começou a babar a mixira de peixe-boi.  
o professor tirou o pincenê: estava traído pelo donatario,  
sem barregas, sem ginetes, sem excravos.<sup>16</sup>

And in "Xangô," Lima also sings of African themes and divinities:

Num sujo mocambo dos 'Quatro Recantos,'  
quibundos, cafuzos, cabindas, mazombos  
mandingam xandô. Oxum! Oxalá! Ô! Ê!

Dois feios calungas — oxalá e taió rodeados de contas, no  
centro o Oxum! Oxum! Oxalá! Ô! Ê!

Caboclos, mulatos, negrinhas membrudas, aos  
tombos gemendo, cantando, rodando,  
mexendo os quadris e as mamas bojudas,  
retumbam o tanta . . . Oxum! Oxalá! Ô! Ê!  
<sup>17</sup>

Both Guillén and Lima succeed in evoking racial memories of their African past but as we have seen they also depict the Negro experience in the Americas. The outwardly simple, singsong aspects of some of these poems (and one must remember that they are designed to be sung and chanted by unlettered people) disguise a more profound sociological significance.

The Black poetry of Nicolás Guillen and Jorge de Lima is similar in several ways, including the political, stylistic, and thematic aspects. Both poets call for a reintegration of the African scions into the political and economic mainstreams of their respective nations. They also stress the speech rhythms of the proletariat, even while drawing heavily upon ballads,

popular songs, and traditional African legends. And they both are talented poets who consistently create startling and unique images through which they lead the reader into the black and mulatto experience in Brazil and Cuba. In doing this, Nicolás Guillén and Jorge de Lima demonstrate the finest aspects of Afro-American poetry. Yet due perhaps to the essentially optimistic and visionary poetry of these two men, one is led to believe that if people of good-will — of all skin colors — would only unite against racial prejudice and economic exploitation, then a new and vital kind of "raza cósmica" would surely result. But even in this larger, humanistic sense, their Black awareness poetry was a necessary first step, an initial effort through which black and mulatto Latin Americans might cease to be sociologically and economically "invisible." The Afro-American poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Jorge de Lima marked the beginning of a great struggle to rekindle the flames of ethnic awareness and pride; but it has also transcended the merely regionalistic or picturesque and become universal and inspiring in its appeal.

#### NOTAS

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2. Jean Franco, *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist* (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1967), p. 131.
3. Nicolás Guillén, *Antología Mayor* (Mexico D.F.: Editorial Diogenes, 1972), pp. 27-28.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. Jorge De Lima, *Antología Poética* (Río de Janeiro: Editorial Sabia, 1969), pp. 53-56.
6. John Nist, *The Modernist Movement in Brazil: A Literary History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), pp. 147-148.
7. Lima, *Antología Poética*, p. 74.
8. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *La Poesía Afrocubana de Nicolás Guillén* (Montevideo: Editorial Arca), p. 87.
9. Guillén, *Antología Mayor*, p. 46.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
11. Cipriano S. Viturera, *La Poesía de Jorge de Lima: Estudio y Antología* (Montevideo: Ediciones "Amizade," 1963), p. 13.
12. Jorge de Lima, *Poesía* (Río de Janeiro: Livrería Agir Editora, 1963), p. 38.
13. Guillén, *Antología Mayor*, pp. 44-45.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
16. Lima, *Antología Poética*, p. 73.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 36.