









**NICOLÁS GUILLÉN**  
**Popular Poet of the Caribbean**





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Popular Poet of the Caribbean

**Ian Isidore Smart**

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To  
*Myrle Elma Smart,*  
youngest and most deeply  
loved ancestor



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *ix*

Textual Note *xi*

**1**

From Kaiso to *Son* and Beyond *1*

**2**

The Poet *29*

**3**

The Smartman *65*

**4**

The Hero *95*

**5**

The *Mujer Nueva* *125*

**6**

The Central Creative Conflict, *Mulatez* *159*

Selected Bibliography *175*

Index *183*



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## TEXTUAL NOTE

The reader is advised that, unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from Spanish or French into English are my own.

To facilitate the documentation of the many quotations from Nicolás Guillén's poetry, they have all been taken from his *Obra poética 1920-1972*, in two volumes, edited by Angel Augier. Reference to the poems themselves, and also to notes and other critical matter taken from that work, will be made simply by indicating in parentheses the volume number and the page.



**NICOLÁS GUILLÉN**  
**Popular Poet of the Caribbean**

Poeta Nacional de Cuba

Langston Hughes

# 1

## From Kaiso to *Son* and Beyond

**B**orn on July 10, 1902, in the town of Camagüey, Nicolás Guillén was, until his death on July 16, 1989, Poeta Nacional of his native Cuba. He is one of the classic Latin American poets of the twentieth century, he is included in important anthologies, and his works are studied in most university courses dealing with contemporary Latin American literature. His name is linked with those of Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, César Vallejo, and Vicente Huidobro, some of the late great masters of Spanish American poetry, whom he knew personally and with whom he was a peer among peers.<sup>1</sup> He is generally lionized by the critics as an exponent of an exotic version of mainstream Latin American poetry, a somewhat avant-garde negroid poetry (literally, *poesía negroide*).<sup>2</sup> He has also been claimed by the experts, and justly so, as a member of the Afro-American literary community, so his name is mentioned in the same breath as those eminent literary figures who were the principals in the so-called Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes.<sup>3</sup> The last-named was a personal friend and, indeed, exercised a considerable influence on the Cuban Poeta Nacional. Since the Négritude movement was originated mainly by Caribbean poets (albeit speaking French and operating out of Paris), Guillén's con-

1. For those unfamiliar with these names, any one of the many manuals of Latin American literature could be consulted, for example, John E. Englekirk et al., *An Anthology of Spanish American Literature*, vol. 2.

2. See, for example, Rosa E. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide en América*.

3. See, for example, Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*.

nections to this phenomenon have been explored with some critical validity.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, there are those other respectable critics, particularly Cubans such as Nancy Morejón, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, and in general the scholars of Casa de las Américas—as well, of course, as those at the recently established Casa del Caribe in Santiago—who see Guillén as a Caribbean poet; Caribbean in the sense in which the current Cuban intellectual establishment defines the term, pregnant with orthodox Marxism and sanitized of any anachronistic, romantic racialism. Guillén would, then, be Caribbean in the same sense in which Gabriel García Márquez could be considered a “Caribbean man.”<sup>5</sup> West Indian intellectuals, like the legendary C. L. R. James and Eric Williams, clearly include Cuba in their vision of the Caribbean, as does the eminent scholar G. R. Coulthard. However, the Caribbean they intend is somewhat more connected to the notion of the pulsating, flesh-and-blood African heritage than would suit, I believe, the Latin American proclaimers of Guillén’s Caribbeanness. Nicolás Guillén, himself, was a solid part of the Cuban intellectual establishment, but in a pivotal poem “West Indies, Ltd” (1934)—perhaps in a doctrinal lapse that would have been quite excusable in those far-off days—he signed himself “Nicolás Guillén, antillano.” He clearly intended the term *antillano* to be the Spanish equivalent of *West Indian*, and this was a linguistically orthodox position. Furthermore, he, at least for that moment, attributed “West Indianness” to himself.

In this book I hope to show, with rational, clinical detachment, that, more than just a momentary manifestation of relaxed intellectual rigor under the influence of the muses, West Indianness is an essential feature of Nicolás Guillén’s poetic art. In fact, reversing the current accepted wisdom of literary scholars, I will view Guillén as first and foremost a West Indian or Caribbean poet, the two terms being used interchangeably.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, I argue that the West Indian character owes its distinctiveness to the African cultural heritage and is, in effect, a legitimate neo-African cultural manifestation. This African West Indian character accounts for the originality

4. On Négritude see, for example, Norman R. Shapiro, ed. and trans., *Négritude: Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean*.

5. I am referring to Black Stalin’s kaiso “The Caribbean Man.”

6. Scholars from the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean, in general, prefer to maintain the traditional distinction between *West Indian* and *Caribbean*. The former term they zealously reserve for themselves, the latter being, in their view, too broad to be a useful analytical tool. It is with full knowledge of this approach that I proceed along a somewhat different analytical path, one I consider to be most fruitful.

and basic value of Guillén's art and links Guillén inextricably to the rich popular poetic tradition of the region. It places him in the same group as Bob Marley, the Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener, Beny Moré, Celia Cruz, and of course, Claude McKay, Derek Walcott, Gerardo Maloney, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Léon Gontron Damas, and Jacques Roumain, among many others.<sup>7</sup>



The books, relatively few indeed, that have been written on Guillén's poetry faithfully tell the tale of the Western academic world's general approach to his art. The Argentinean Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, himself a literary figure in his own right, set the tone for the scholarship on Guillén with his aptly titled work, *La poesía afro-cubana de Nicolás Guillén* (Nicolás Guillén's Afro-Cuban poetry), published in 1962.

In the same year, the noted Cuban scholar and poet Angel Augier began the publication of his pivotal biocritical work on his friend and fellow revolutionary intellectual. Augier is the leading expert on Guillén, and his work is ongoing. The original *Nicolás Guillén: Notas para un estudio biográfico-crítico* (Nicolás Guillén: Notes for a biocritical study), which were first released as part of Guillén's sixtieth birthday celebrations, have evolved into a two-volume study entitled simply *Nicolás Guillén*. As Poeta Nacional, Guillén was also president of UNEAC, the Spanish acronym for the National Union of Cuban Artists and Writers. Augier is himself an official of this prestigious association, which enjoys governmental status in the Marxist-Leninist society that is contemporary Cuba. Augier's work on Guillén, then, not only is scholastically sound but also has to be doctrinally correct. He is, in fact, the general editor of the complete works of Nicolás Guillén.

Nancy Morejón, a brilliant, extremely sensitive, and personable young poet of unquestionable African ancestry, can be considered the deputy official expert on Guillén, who was her mentor. Morejón is one of the cadre of intellectual workers employed by UNEAC. She has written to date two books on Guillén: *Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén* (A collection of works on Nicolás Guillén) and *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén* (Nationhood and racial

7. The late Robert Nestor Marley from Jamaica is credited with making the Jamaican popular literary form known as reggae internationally popular. The Mighty Sparrow and Lord Kitchener are the best-known exponents of the kaiso; as is customary, they have adopted pseudonyms. Beny Moré and Celia Cruz are internationally popular exponents of Caribbean oral literary forms; in their case these are the *son*, rumba, and *guaguanco*, for example, from their native Cuba.

mixing in the works of Nicolás Guillén). Naturally, her views of Guillén's work conform substantially to the view that race, like class, is an anachronism in contemporary Cuba and is not germane to the discussion of the post-revolutionary or quintessential art of the Poeta Nacional.

Claude Couffon's *Nicolás Guillén* and Adriana Tous's *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén* have held to the lines established by the scholars mentioned above. Jorge María Ruscalleda Bercedóniz in *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén: Cuatro elementos sustanciales* makes a valiant attempt to apply the insights of modern linguistic science to the stunning technical contributions Guillén made to mainstream Hispanic poetics. However, Ruscalleda appears to fall prey to the overwhelming complexities that contemporary linguistics has brought to the discussion of literary art, complexities that have to a large extent replaced the fine critical sensibilities of the traditional literary scholar and that, in my opinion, are ultimately counterproductive.

The Trinidadian scholar Dennis Sardinha has the distinction of being the first to write a book on Guillén in English. Entitled simply *The Poetry of Nicolás Guillén*, it was a follow-up to a series of lectures Sardinha gave in London and relies heavily on Augier's scholarship. On the other hand, two Jamaican-born scholars resident in North America have written the only two full-size critical works to appear in the English language so far. These are Lorna V. Williams's *Self and Society in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén* and Keith Ellis's *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén: Poetry and Ideology*.

Significant as all of these studies undoubtedly are, they do not leave the beaten track of Western scholarly concerns and perspectives. Even Vera Kutzinski's brilliant analysis in her recently published *Against the American Grain* (for all her protestations to the contrary) does not do true justice to the neo-African West Indian core of Guillén's art. Using analytical tools developed by the latest trends in Western and, in particular, Euro-North American literary scholarship, she argues that the burden of Guillén's art, like that of many other contemporary American writers, is a cogent demonstration that "there is no one cultural tradition [neither the African nor the European] that can legitimately claim . . . centrality and assert its superiority over another."<sup>8</sup> This position is ultimately consistent with those unmasked by Richard L. Jackson in the opening chapter of his landmark book, *The Black Image in Latin American Literature*. Jackson insightfully contends that such a view

8. Vera M. Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén*, 248.

represents "Ethnic Lynching, or *Mestizaje* Properly Seen," as this title of one of the subsections of his opening chapter roundly proclaims.<sup>9</sup>

In 1952 a great Caribbean scholar and political leader, the late Eric E. Williams, signaled the direction leading to the most fruitful appreciation of Nicolás Guillén's poetry. His lecture "Four Poets of the Greater Antilles," delivered on April 4, 1952, to the Trinidad and Tobago League of Cultural and Debating Clubs, posits a basic cultural link, founded on the common African heritage, between poetic expressions in two different European languages produced by the four Caribbean/Antillean/West Indian poets: Guillén from Cuba, Luis Palés Matos from Puerto Rico, Jacques Roumain and Jean Brière from Haiti.<sup>10</sup> Wilfred Cartey, another important Caribbean intellectual and man of letters, as early as 1958 continued Williams's line of thought in an article "Como surge Nicolás Guillén en las Antillas" (How Nicolás Guillén came out of the West Indies). The concept of what might be called West Indianness in literature, then, is not a new one; neither is the idea of Nicolás Guillén's fundamental role in this West Indian or Pan-Caribbean literary essence. It is a concept that G. R. Coulthard firmly but somewhat indirectly established in his pivotal *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature*.

Posited on the concept of West Indianness, my argument in this book goes against the flow, or as Vera Kutzinski would put it "against the . . . grain," a circumstance that necessarily creates difficulty without necessarily bestowing merit.<sup>11</sup> However, the merit of this particular effort should become clear upon careful, dispassionate reflection. The claim that Nicolás Guillén is Antillean (*antillano*) amounts to a mere truism. The connection between West Indian and Antillean is unimpeachably valid linguistically, historically, and indeed culturally. The fact that the African heritage is the most important component of West Indian culture is indisputable.

Yet the mainstream of academe tends to balk at assigning West

9. Richard L. Jackson, *The Black Image in Latin American Literature*.

10. Shapiro points out in a footnote that Jean-Fernand Brière's "last name occasionally appears as Brière. His middle name, which he rarely uses in print, is given incorrectly by some sources as François" (*Négritude*, 218).

11. I had developed the ideas for this book and even completed the first draft of the manuscript before learning of the existence of Kutzinski's work. In fact, I first ascribed a primordial "West Indianness" to Guillén's art when I was a doctoral student at UCLA (1971-1975), and this idea constituted the basic premise of my dissertation, "The Creative Dialogue in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén: Europe and Africa." It was, of course, personally gratifying that the views of this brilliant scholar, so well regarded by the North American scholarly establishment, should coincide with my views in such a fundamental fashion.

Indianness to the poetry of Nicolás Guillén. Surely some supra-rational or, more precisely, prelogical factors must come into play. The issue of intellectual decolonization has to be raised. I want this book to take an active part in the dialogue between the forces of liberation and those that perpetuate the socioeconomic and cultural status quo, the old imperialism that has dominated so many of us for so long and that seeks subtly (and not so subtly) to maintain its paralyzing sway, imposing theoretical approaches that are largely irrelevant and ultimately limiting. The most appropriate critical approach to an assessment of Guillén's art must surely be one developed precisely for that purpose, a literary theory that would fully account for his peculiar creative genius (a genius that must relate to his West Indianness and must be connected to the peculiar creative geniuses of other West Indian literary figures). A specifically West Indian literary theory, then, elaborated first and foremost to explicate the literature of the region, must be the most fruitful framework for appreciating Guillén's work.

Caribbean literature, somewhat like Jes Grew of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, has yet to find its "text." Since it is a scribal literature, it is indisputably a component of world literature, and in this real sense its text (that is, its theory) already exists. To speak of inventing the text as Alejo Carpentier might have put it is to speak loosely.<sup>12</sup> Reed's metaphor is much more in touch with the basic sense of the process. The task of committed Caribbean critics is not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to decide for themselves what is the most appropriate way of using the wheel. The ideas developed by Williams and Cartey are reaffirmed in the writings of one of the most highly acclaimed political strategists of the twentieth century, the Martinican Frantz Fanon. These ideas along with Fanon's key

12. Carpentier is highly regarded by literary scholars who have addressed the question of Guillén's peculiar contribution to Western art. Roberto González Echevarría, for example, claims, "Carpentier's *Concierto barroco* is in many ways one of the most perceptive pieces of criticism on Guillén's poetry and a clarification of its vast genealogy and progeny." For, he argues, because "inclusive" baroque aesthetics created a space for the exotica that was and continues to be peculiarly American, "The speech of blacks in Góngora's poetry is like the presence of Inca or Aztec deities on church friezes" ("Guillén as Baroque: Meaning in *Motivos de son*," 306, 305). All of this is true and useful, as far as it goes. However, the central thesis of my book is that this line of approach is incomplete. In fact, in a recently published article on the young Panamanian poet Gerardo Maloney I suggested, "The claim [that Maloney's *conceptismo* is] derived exclusively from the baroque would be just as tendentious as the claim that the baroque itself derives exclusively from the secular African tradition which both preceded it in time and with which it had considerable contact" ("Popular Black Intellectualism in Gerardo Maloney's *Juega vivo*," 46).

insights are constituent elements of the indigenous literary theory, the text that must now be found.

Within the last decade, more or less, many scholarly works have added to the discussion. In the chapter "Conclusion: Towards a Pan-Caribbean Literature" of my book on Central American writers of West Indian origin (1984), there is a summary of the current state of West Indian literary theory. It is still true that, whereas the idea of a Pan-Caribbean culture, identity, and literary theory continues to gain acceptance as a scholarly premise, the consequent rigorous theoretical elaborations have largely been absent.

The most insightful and productive scholarship has occurred in fields that are not strictly literary—history, anthropology, sociology—or in literary research that has been heavily influenced by these fields. Franklin Knight's work is a good example of the former case, and Selwyn Cudjoe's is well representative of the latter. Kenneth Ramchand's work on the West Indian novel, for example, is still a seminal contribution to Caribbean literary theory, but it is limited by its—understandable in the circumstances—exclusive concentration on the Anglophone Caribbean.<sup>13</sup>

The truly Pan-Caribbean literary scholar would have to be fluent in two or more of the languages of the area. It is very instructive that Williams in his pivotal article cited earlier should have drawn specific attention to this concern: "In my opinion, the development and organisation of this common body of knowledge of the Caribbean, based on the deliberate cultivation of multi-lingual facility, is the great political desideratum and intellectual truth of the age and the area."<sup>14</sup> Sadly, now nearly four decades later, the desired multi-lingual skills that the common man in several Caribbean countries has traditionally possessed—in countries like Aruba, Curaçao, Saint Lucia, Dominica, Panama, Costa Rica, supposedly some regions of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and to some extent Saint Vincent and Grenada—still elude the general body of Caribbean intellectuals. Attempts to incorporate multilingualism in a profoundly structural fashion into the humanistic and even social science disciplines as they relate to the Caribbean have not responded to the urgency of Williams's concern. As was stated earlier, the last few years have brought some encouraging stirrings in this matter, the most progressive and inspiring having emanated from Cuba. The recently

13. Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*. Selwyn R. Cudjoe, *Resistance and Caribbean Literature*. Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*.

14. Eric Williams, "Four Poets of the Greater Antilles," 8.

established Casa del Caribe in Santiago, perhaps the most Caribbean of cities, is the finest example of this trend.



To appreciate in its fullness the West Indianness of Guillén's poetry we must first fashion a Pan-Caribbean poetics that would be truly Caribbean. The notion of the "implied Caribbean reader," based on Wayne C. Booth's postulations of the implied author and reader, appears to be a most useful tool in the elaboration of a Pan-Caribbean poetics.<sup>15</sup> In the spirit of Frantz Fanon this notion can be viewed as one of those "sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward" and to which those engaged in working out "new concepts, and try[ing] to set afoot a new man" can reasonably have recourse.<sup>16</sup> A fruitful critique of authentic Caribbean literature must avoid both the devil of slavish imitation, the "*Mimic Men* syndrome," and the deep blue sea of contrived ignorance, the self-annihilating quest to reinvent the wheel. In this regard, it could be said that very few critics of Guillén's poetry have escaped the former peril despite the obvious existence of precedents and guideposts signaling the way to authenticity and liberation.

The implied author has been insightfully interpreted by Seymour Chapman as "the principle that invented the narrator . . . who unlike the narrator . . . can tell us nothing."<sup>17</sup> The implied reader would analogously be a principle that invents the ideal reader, the receptor of the messages sent in the literary communication. If the implied author is an "organizing principle," the implied reader could be seen as an "appreciating principle." To construct a Pan-Caribbean poetics that is West Indian in the fullest sense of the term, an "implied Caribbean reader" would first have to be postulated. Then a series of pertinent questions could be asked of that reader to deter-

15. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Edward Pechter, in an article in *PMLA* (one, if not the most "canonical," of the "canonical" journals), speaks to the issue of the ineluctable change in trends, even in so hallowed a human activity as literary analysis. One of the indications, he asserts, of the still disquieting shift from "indifference" to "avid interest" in history is precisely Wayne Booth's declaration "recently in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* [another "canonical" forum] that he is trading in his reliable and efficient 'implied reader' for a powerful new vehicle called the 'real reader'" ("The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," 292). Such radical shifts would devastate the critical apparatuses of colonized intellectuals, for those apparatuses are not generated with any particular attention to the peculiar sensibilities that are given expression in the art of Third World peoples.

16. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 254, 255.

17. Seymour Chapman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, 148.

mine his view of poetry, and his view of what is poetic par excellence.

In practical terms this operation would have to be carried out simply by analyzing the traditional literary aesthetics already in place in the region. There exists a thriving and long-standing popular oral poetry in the Caribbean, and this is constantly being subjected to review and criticism in the most basic, if apparently informal, fashion. The Trinidadian kaiso, the Jamaican reggae, the *plena*, the *bomba* from Puerto Rico, the many Cuban forms, the *son*, the *guaguanco*, the *rumba*, and so on, are all examples of this popular poetry that is constantly subjected to the appreciating principle of popular taste, that is, to the "implied Caribbean reader/listener." There is, then, demonstrably in place a critical apparatus that is coterminous with this implied Caribbean reader/listener. It assesses all the literary art that comes before the public and is the principle that accounts for the popularity of any artistic product.

To my knowledge, no work to date has sought to analyze in a structured scholarly fashion the principle that accounts for the popularity of traditional Caribbean poetry in general. However, some serious literary scholars have already begun to examine the oral poetry of certain areas of the region. Their work has to be placed in the context of the earlier, if less strictly literary, efforts of figures like Alejo Carpentier, Melville J. Herskovits, and Fernando Ortiz.<sup>18</sup> The younger scholars have benefited from the insights of these academic ancestors and have produced interesting literary studies.

In 1982 Keith Q. Warner wrote an innovative work on the Trinidadian kaiso that incorporated some of the research undertaken by Gordon Rohlehr. Warner is a Trinidadian, and Rohlehr, born in Guyana, lives and works in Trinidad teaching at the university there. Rito Llerena Villalobos in 1985 completed a lengthy book on the *vallenato*, a popular oral literary expression from his native Colombia, using an approach exactly analogous to Rohlehr's and Warner's treatments of the corresponding oral literary expression from Trinidad and Tobago. Rohlehr went one step further in his book on the important scribal Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite.<sup>19</sup> In

18. See, for example, Alejo Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*; Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; or Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Nuevo cañuto de cubanismos*.

19. Keith Q. Warner, *Kaiso! The Trinidad Calypso: A Study of the Calypso as Oral Literature*. Rito Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural en el vallenato: Un modelo de textualidad en la canción folclórica colombiana*. Gordon Rohlehr, *The Pathfinder: Black Awakening in The Arrivants of Edward Kamau Brathwaite*.

this work he applied the perspective and methodologies he had derived from his study of the kaiso to his analysis of a scribal poet, not from Trinidad but from Barbados.

The kaiso is the poetic expression that I best understand; it is the one that I learned to appreciate even before I learned to read. It clearly has to be my point of contact with the appreciating principle of Caribbean poetry in order to construct a Pan-Caribbean poetics, just as it apparently was Rohlehr's. Along with Warner's more or less strictly literary study, there exists a body of important works on the kaiso. The most academic of these was written by Errol Hill, a Trinidadian dramatist and professor. Two of the better-known exponents of the art form, Atilla and Chalkdust, have penned pivotal works on the subject.<sup>20</sup> These three latter works, then, provide a profoundly inspiring basis for analyzing the aesthetics of kaiso.

Raymond Quevedo, better known by his singing name of Atilla the Hun, was born in Trinidad in 1892 of a Trinidadian mother and a Venezuelan father. He presents the unique combination of a master of the performing arts and a pioneering analyst of the same art. His book on the Trinidad kaiso was completed in 1950, well before his death in 1962, but was not published until 1983. The very first page of the introduction proffers this definition of kaiso: "Kaiso is a particular form of folksong undeniably African in origin which was brought by the African slaves to the West Indies. Conditioned historically by its new environment and by French acculturation, the kaiso developed most distinctively in Trinidad into a form of mass art in song and dance uniquely or typically West Indian." Atilla, the *maitre-chant*, the master bard, could not be clearer.<sup>21</sup> He explicitly affirms that the Africanness of the form lies principally in its rhythm based on the drumbeat. Furthermore, he uses the language of anthropologists to establish the basic Pan-Caribbeanness, in his precise terms, the "uniquely or typically West Indian" character of the form.

He even clears up the confusion over the name of the form, suggesting that the term *calypso* is a misnomer based on the Eurocentrism of the dominant cultural minority in its attempt to label the art of the masses. He asserts, "In my own experience of over half a century's association with kaiso, carnival, and kaiso tents, the first word which I heard to describe this song and dance form was

20. Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*. Raymond Quevedo (Atilla the Hun), *Atilla's Kaiso: A Short History of Trinidad Calypso*, and Hollis U. L. Liverpool (Chalkdust), *Kaiso and Society*.

21. Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso*, 2. The French Creole expression *maitre-chant* was used by kaisonians of the old days to describe their teachers.

'kaiso.' 'Kaiso' was used to describe the song when sung as well as a means of expressing ecstatic satisfaction over what was in the opinion of the audience a particularly excellent kaiso." The term *kaiso* itself is, he claims, of African origin, but it is to Errol Hill, the more orthodox scholar, that we owe the most convincing argument in favor of this assertion. Hill cites the Hausa word *kaito* or *kaico*, "pronounced either *kaitso* or *kaicho*," as the most likely source of the Trinidadian term. The Hausa expression is used in praise songs in precisely the same manner in which *kaiso* is used in the Trinidadian song. It can be "an expression of regret, of triumph, of contempt, or of condemnation, according to the context."<sup>22</sup>

Atilla's review of the history of the form further highlights its African origin. The original kaiso singers were the chantwells or lead singers of the carnival bands. They functioned in exactly the same way as the lead singers, also called chantwells, of the work gangs. One of the most characteristic of the carnival band songs was the *kalenda*, a particularly vigorous, almost aggressive chant in the usual call-response mode that was associated with the stick-fighting bands. The sense of contest, of self-assertion even to the point of belligerence, is an integral part of the kaiso and of carnival.

It may be reasonably asserted that all of the essential features of carnival are more profoundly rooted in ancient African civilization than was commonly believed heretofore. The renowned British Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge has provided a fascinating account of many aspects of the central beliefs and practices of the ancient Africans who inhabited the Nile valley. Their devotion to Osiris and Isis constituted the core of their religious life, and at holy towns such as Abydos and Dendera they annually celebrated mystery plays in which they reenacted the main events of the life of their ancestors or gods. Referring to the act of the Osiris play that was "the greatest," Wallis Budge asserts:

This act . . . represented the "coming forth" of Osiris from the temple after his death. . . . A solemn service was performed in the temple before the body was carried from it, and offerings were eaten sacramentally, and then the procession set out for the tomb. When it reached the door of the temple it was received by a mighty crowd of men and women who raised the death-wail, and uttered piercing shrieks and lamentations, and the women beat their breasts. Many of the men in the crowd were armed with sticks and staves, and some of them pressed forward towards the procession with the view of helping the god, whilst others strove to prevent

22. Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso*, 4. Hill, *Carnival*, 61, 62.

them. Thus a sham fight took place, which, owing to the excitement of the combatants, often degenerated into a serious one.<sup>23</sup>

This sounds very much like a description of the earliest stick fight, played out in a dramatic annual ritual that involved masses of people dancing and singing in procession through the streets. In fact, it is clear from later descriptions of the closely related ritual for Isis, the wife of Osiris, that the participants wore disguises; that is, they were masqueraders.

It is reasonable to affirm that the Osirian mystery plays are the source of the theater for the Greeks and thus for Western civilization. A convincing argument can be presented to support the theory that the Latin carnival, a Christianization of preexisting Roman religious rites, had its source, too, in ancient Africa. Wallis Budge and others report that Egyptian religion was extremely popular in the entire ancient world and throughout all of pre-Christian Europe: "In the fourth century before Christ Athens was a kind of centre of the Egyptian religion. . . . In Rome, in the first century before Christ, Isis was regarded as one of the principal goddesses of the city. . . . From Rome, the capital, the cult of Isis naturally spread to the provinces, and thence, little by little, to Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Gaul." There were two important festivals for Isis in ancient Rome, one in November and the other in spring. Wallis Budge reconstructs this spring festival, providing the following description: "At the head of the great procession came men who were dressed to represent a soldier, a huntsman, a woman, and a gladiator. These were followed by men dressed as magistrates, philosophers, fowlers, and fishermen."<sup>24</sup>

It is clear, too, that all of the contemporary New World carnivals are closely related. Nina S. de Friedemann, for example, reports on the aggressive self-assertion that characterizes the traditional carnival celebrations in the region of Barranquilla, Colombia, especially in the central tradition of the groups of Congo dancers and *mas players* (to use the Trinidadian equivalent) who come out on the streets for carnival.<sup>25</sup> In fact, as John M. Lipski reports, the Congo groups are found in neighboring Panama as well, and the high point of their cultural life is precisely the carnival season. "Within each [Congo] village the townspeople choose a queen, and

23. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 2:6.

24. *Ibid.*, 2:285-86, 296-97.

25. See Nina S. de Friedemann, "Perfiles sociales del carnaval en Barranquilla (Colombia)." Staying close to the beaten track of Western scholarship, Friedemann traces the origins of carnival only as far back as Rome and possibly Greece.

several other personages, including Juan de Dioso (Saint John), *cribani* (scribes), and various *diablitos* (demons), who are collectively responsible for staging the games and ceremonies replayed each year during nearly two months of Carnival."<sup>26</sup> He continues more pertinently, "considerable rivalry exists among villages, and mock raids and battles are held when a congo group from one town attacks the *rancho* (a makeshift lean-to or covered area, in which the congo ceremonies take place) [compare the tents and *mas camps* of Trinidad and the *palacios* of the Colombians] of another village, and attempts to steal its flag."<sup>27</sup>

The colonial authorities were always uneasy with the (as far as they were concerned) quite uncharacteristic display of self-confidence that surfaced during the Trinidad carnival celebrations, and they sought constantly to curtail it. They used first the powerful moral argument that has always worked well with conquered peoples afflicted with the intense collective sense of guilt and self-depreciation that is a natural consequence of being vanquished and that is carefully nurtured by the ravishers. The argument is posited on the "self-evident" inferiority of everything native and on the consequent moral imperative to seek "redemption" through assimilation to the colonizers' value system, not only in the temporal order, but even in the spiritual as well. Frantz Fanon addresses the formulation and concretization of this principle of human psychology using the term *Manichaeism* to describe the colonial world.<sup>28</sup> Legal prohibitions backed up by vicious displays of brute force typically followed if the appeal to the "morality" of the vanquished was not sufficient. However, through the kaiso and the carnival, the African-ancestored Trinidadian population resisted valiantly, and with overwhelming success, all the onslaughts of the colonial authorities; in fact, in this area at least, the conquered became the conquerors.

This consideration is very important, for it bears not only on the Africanness of the kaiso and the carnival but on its Pan-Caribbeanness. One finds throughout the area a consistent correlation between tenacity to the African cultural heritage and the sense of proprietorship, of uniqueness, experienced by the population. The proprietary pride experienced by Trinidadians and Tobagonians with respect to their carnival and kaiso (that this is uniquely "we

26. John M. Lipski, "The *negros congos* of Panama: Afro-Hispanic Creole Language and Culture," 412. Wallis Budge has surmised that the Osirian mystery plays lasted for days, even weeks (*Osiris*, 2:12).

27. Lipski, "The *negros congos*," 412.

28. Fanon, *The Wretched*, 31.

thing”) is felt with equal intensity about other forms by other African-ancestored populations in the region. Llerena Villalobos, for example, speaks with pride of the “intertextuality” shared by the *valle-nato* and the literature of “our Nobel Prize Winner,” Gabriel García Márquez. Nicolás Guillén himself saw the *son* as “the only thing left that is truly ours.”<sup>29</sup>

Since the kaiso and carnival are the crystallization of the peculiar genius of the Trinidad and Tobago population, being expressions of self-affirmation that have survived colonial machinations and the self-annihilation syndrome that afflicts oppressed peoples, Errol Hill sees them as the appropriate aesthetic base on which to build a national theater.<sup>30</sup> The reflections I presented earlier on the roots of carnival in ancient Egyptian civilization complement Hill’s insights. Carnival is theater, plain and simple, being a processional dance acted out by groups of masked participants to the accompaniment of music.<sup>31</sup> The dance movement of the group is intimately connected to the theme of the masquerade. In Trinidad one *plays mas*, that is, one performs one’s masquerade in exactly the same way one plays a role in the theater. The kaiso song led by the chantwell is also an integral part of the performance, and all participate in it lustily.

V. S. Naipaul, a brilliant, but sometimes confused, interpreter of Trinidadian and Caribbean society, understands that the kaiso is the form that most perfectly reflects the genius of Trinidad and Tobago’s culture. It is precisely in his first and to my mind his best novel, *Miguel Street*, that the kaiso assumes its fullest role as vehicle for social commentary. Samuel Selvon, another very gifted Trinidadian literary artist, has used the prose of kaiso tents to create the most distinctive language of narration in stories such as “Brackley and the Bed.” It was Kenneth Ramchand’s judgment that: “This is as far as any West Indian author has gone towards closing the gap between the language of narration and the language of the fictional character.”<sup>32</sup>

The process by which Africans became the new natives of the Caribbean took an interesting and particularly Pan-Caribbean form in Trinidad, as the history of the kaiso and carnival demonstrate. Columbus led the band of Spanish colonizers to the island on his

29. Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural*, 76. Angel Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 91.

30. Hence the title and major thesis of his work, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*.

31. This aspect of carnival is well understood by certain recently published commentators on Guillén’s poetry, to wit, Vera M. Kutzinski and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, as I will explore at greater length in Chapter 2.

32. V. S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street*. Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, 102.

third voyage, but, since there was no gold there, the Europeans used the territory merely as a way station in their crazed quest of the mythical *El Dorado*. The British wrested political control from the Spanish at the very end of the eighteenth century. Their political hegemony, however, coincided with the intense wave of immigration to the island by displaced French-speaking European colonists and their French Creole-speaking African captive workers, a consequence of the political upheavals that led to and resulted from the French Revolution. Nineteenth-century Trinidad was, then, an ex-Spanish colony that still retained a basically Hispanic social infrastructure in terms of the religious customs and practices (Catholicism prevailed), place names, and even laws. However, the language of the majority of the population was French Creole. So the kaiso was principally sung in French Creole, a syncretic, eminently Caribbean language that combines general West African syntactic features with a French European lexicon. Interestingly, Atilla cites the following example of a kaiso in an unadulterated African language:

Ja Ja Romey Eh  
Ja Ja Romey Shango

Ja Ja Romey Eh Mete Beni  
Ja Ja Romey Shango<sup>33</sup>

Characteristically, this early song is frankly religious in theme—Shango being an important Yoruba *loa* or god—and in this respect is clearly related to the earliest examples of popular oral literature extant from Cuba.<sup>34</sup> However, it is the only example I have found; thus its existence does not substantially invalidate the claim that the new African language, French Creole, is the original language of the kaiso.

The British authorities were uncomfortable with the use of French Creole and campaigned vigorously to promote English. This led to the replacement of French Creole with the English Creole that became, in the twentieth century, the new language of the kaiso. Obviously, the authorities could not be satisfied with this development, for what they really sought to excise was the Creole and not the French. This is made clear if one looks at the sense and direction of their campaign. They inveighed against what they claimed was the lewd, unbecoming language of the calypso. Had the language been English, and not English Creole, the medium of expression

33. Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso*, 6.

34. See Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 83–85.

would have been de-Africanized and so would have immediately satisfied the "moral scruples" of the colonial powers.

A further Pan-Caribbean dimension of the kaiso resulted from actual contacts established among the inhabitants of the various islands. Since this was determined by the needs of colonial governments more than anything else, it was largely effected through the inter-island shipping activity between the territories ruled by Britain. This contact, as Atilla demonstrates, accounted for the mutual influences exercised by the popular poetic traditions of islands like Saint Vincent, Grenada, Jamaica, and Barbados on the kaiso of Trinidad and Tobago. Atilla's overall conclusion based on the "musical affinity between the kaisos from French speaking territories with those of Trinidad [is] . . . that the distinctiveness of the Trinidad kaiso may be attributed, in large part, to the stimulus of French influence in our cultural heritage." For he argues that, whereas the kaisos from Jamaica and Barbados possess a certain "correctness of measurement," a certain "rather staid, prim and proper melodic structure," those from the

other territories [presumably the French-speaking ones along with Trinidad] show a tendency to have acceleration and deceleration of tempo, a lively, vivacious melodic structure, a certain rhythmic unevenness including departure from the return to rhythm, breaking and remeshing the words with music, a rendering of the half beat which makes kaiso music of a certain type so difficult to score (no doubt connected with the drum accompaniment of a former period also used in kalenda and congo) and a nuance in presentation which are some of the identifiable characteristics found in the Trinidad kaiso.<sup>35</sup>

Atilla's description of the characteristics of the Trinidadian kaiso is startlingly similar to descriptions of the eminently Cuban popular dance song called the *son*, which was analyzed in a comprehensive manner by the famed Cuban musicologist, novelist, poet, essayist, and general man of ideas, Alejo Carpentier. My next chapter, "The Poet," will enter into greater detail on this matter. It should be noted here, however, that Carpentier waxes enthusiastic about the great musical revolution created by the *son*, an engaging new poly-rhythmic form based on the drumbeat. Léopold Sédar Senghor, one of the founders of the Négritude movement who was later to become president of his native Senegal and who is considered one of the most important poets working today in the French language, has himself contributed to the discussion of African rhythm—a contribution that I will also examine in greater detail in the follow-

35. Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso*, 19.

ing chapter. The most important and, indeed, the distinguishing features of this rhythm are its vitality, syncopation, irregularity, its unity in diversity. In his view, a similar rhythm is the famous North American "swing," which comes straight out of Africa.<sup>36</sup> No person familiar with the distinctive rhythms developed by African-ancestored peoples, in the Americas and indeed elsewhere, would question the African provenience of this cultural manifestation. Furthermore, even the untrained but sensitive musical enthusiast can easily distinguish the similarities in the musical forms that have been identified with Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Trinidad: to wit, the *son*, the *merengue*, and the *kaiso*, respectively.

The evidence indicates, then, that the affinity Atilla noted between the *kaiso* and the songs developed in the French-speaking islands cannot be explained sufficiently by the French connection. This link is, in fact, accidental. The substantial connecting factor is the common Africanness. Consistent with this interpretation, the differential elements of the forms that emerged in Jamaica and Barbados would have to be accounted for in a somewhat different manner from the explanation adduced by Atilla. The staidness, the prim and proper quality that he detected in these forms, results from their divergence from the pristine African model, their adulteration by a stilted, uncreative, blind adherence to the alien but prestigious model imposed by the colonial machine.

Atilla's attention to the essential Pan-Caribbean feature of the *kaiso* invites a comparison with available research on analogous forms that are native to other regions of the area. Carpentier's work on music in Cuba is one of the earliest of these published pieces of research. However, Llerena Villalobos's work on the *vallenato*, a popular Colombian form that closely resembles the *kaiso*, was published recently (1984) and provides a much more useful focus of comparison. The *vallenato* is the typical music of that area of Colombia that comprises the departments of "la Guajira, Magdalena, César, Bolívar, Sucre, Córdoba and the fringe of the department of Antioquia." The region lies in Colombia's northern section, between Venezuela to the east and Panama to the west, with the Caribbean Sea to the north. Geographically, this region is most assuredly part of the Caribbean. This is the land in which Gabriel García Márquez was born, in which he situates his central fictional town of Macondo, and which is ultimately the well from which he draws his creative impulses. Llerena Villalobos claims, "there can be observed a mutual relationship of linkages or of intertextuality

36. Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 1: Négritude et humanisme*, 281.

between the *vallenato* as a form of oral literature of the coastal region and the work of our Nobel laureate in literature [García Márquez]. His work and the *vallenato* song share, in large measure, a similar world of textual references, the same underlying principles and structures of day-to-day conduct." Llerena Villalobos views the form as popular oral poetry, and in his opening statement on methodology and analytical framework he declares, "The general semiotic perspective applied to . . . the study . . . has consisted of considering the system of songs called 'vallenatos' as CULTURAL TEXTS and the entire process of transmission-reception of these songs as a process of CULTURAL COMMUNICATION."<sup>37</sup>

Llerena Villalobos's is a laboriously detailed study, and of the many exhaustive lists it includes, there is one listing of "Some of the FEATURES OF THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE TOWNS AND RURAL AREAS OF THE COASTAL REGION which can be enumerated on the basis of direct observation and interviews." Many of these features would be typical of any largely rural community, but because this community is geographically and historically Caribbean, some of the features are worthy of our attention. The second feature noted is the popular adherence to a "syncretic, animistic, fetishistic and superstitious religiosity." The sixth is the custom of passing down roles from parents to children, for example, "Mr. Victor Camarillo, from Valledupar, every year plays devil for carnival; this tradition was handed down to him from family members who preceded him." The eighth and ninth are related and refer to a tendency to exhibitionism, to macho boastfulness and the spirit of "competitive confrontation." The twelfth is the "Use of paralinguistic forms to call attention, to show surprise, and of descriptive onomatopoeias like 'oh . . . so-and-so,' 'whey,' . . . 'hepa,' . . . 'whepa.'" The tenth feature (closely related to the fifth) is the use of "names of farms, dogs, cows and bulls [that] are humorous (within guidelines consistent with the prevailing patterns of humor in the region) and function as mechanisms to throw 'digs,' 'satire,' at antagonistic neighbors and adversaries." The fifth characteristic, which I have kept for last because of its stunning Pan-Caribbean relevance, is presented as follows: "The criticism, the satire and social 'back-stabbing' in the jokes, the anecdotes, the '*mamagallismo*' season the expressions of humor and '*picardía*' of the peoples of the region in the realm of their orality."<sup>38</sup>

The features singled out in the preceding paragraph clearly have their parallels in the Trinidad and Tobago of the kaiso, and, as will

37. Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural*, 17, 76, 19.

38. *Ibid.*, 26, 26, 27, 28, 28, 27.

be seen in the course of this book, in the local and popular culture of many other regions of the Caribbean. At this introductory stage, when my primary objective is simply to establish the validity of the overall approach, leaving the substantial demonstration for the main body of the book, it will suffice to highlight the impressive correlation between the fifth trait and what has been considered by many Trinidadians, intellectuals and otherwise, to be a characteristically Trinidadian trait: the overindulgence in *picong*, “giving fatigue,” *mamaguying*. Clearly *picong* and *mamaguying* are central to the kaiso; clearly, too, the confrontation aspect is central to the kaiso, as it is to carnival. Indeed, it would come as a shock to most Trinidadians that *costeño* Colombians engage in *mamaguying* to the extent that one popular *vallenato* presents the *mamagallista* tendency as an essentially local feature:

Es mi pueblo costumbrista  
 gran gallero y cumbiambero  
 trompeador, mamagallista  
 que es la creencia de mis abuelos.<sup>39</sup>

(My people believe in their customs  
 their cockfighting and their *cumbia* music.  
 They are macho and great *mamaguyers*,  
 and this is how it was with my grandparents.)

My later chapter “The Smartman” will address this matter in careful detail, pointing out that some kind of *mamaguying*, *picong*, *choteo*, “giving fatigue,” or “signifying” is essential to the culture of most, if not all, the communities of African-ancestored peoples that have developed in the Americas.

A mere look at the geography of the Caribbean region will help explain the linguistic and hence cultural connection between Trinidad and Colombia. The island of Trinidad is just a few miles off the Venezuelan coast. If, as the geographical reality compellingly invites, the Caribbean is considered a unit, then Trinidad would be immediately contiguous with the northern littoral of Venezuela, which is itself immediately contiguous with the Colombian region where the *vallenato* developed. This geographic proximity results in a rather intense cultural and historical interrelationship, which appears to have been undervalued by mainstream scholarship. Atila himself, born Raymond (that is, Raimundo) Quevedo, is the son of a Trinidadian mother and a Venezuelan father. One of the greatest kaiso singers of all time was Philip (that is, Felipe) Garcia; he

39. *Ibid.*, 98.

"began singing in 1899 and went blind in 1950." Chalkdust says of him: "Of Venezuelan parentage, Trinidadian by birth, calypsonian by profession, [he] will always remain a hero."<sup>40</sup>

One of the traditional instruments of kaiso music is the *cuatro*, a small four-stringed guitar, which was evidently developed in a Hispanophone cultural environment. Atilla calls it a "South American instrument." Llerena Villalobos's book (as in the following quote, for example) reveals further points of coincidence between the *vallenato* and the kaiso. The characteristic musical instrument used in the Colombian form is the accordion.

Furthermore, the creators and interpreters of *vallenatos* were country folks, primitive poets who could hardly read nor write, and who were completely ignorant of the laws of music. They played by ear the accordions which they had acquired from God knows where, and the better-off families of the region considered the *vallenato* songs to be the province of barefoot peasants, just good enough perhaps to entertain drunks but not ever under any circumstances to cross the threshold of a decent home.

As was the case with kaiso music and the steel band or the *tambour bamboo* of old, there were social and, indeed, legal prohibitions imposed by the society with a view to stamping out the pernicious influence of the primitive form.<sup>41</sup>

The important Ecuadorean novelist Nelson Estupiñán Bass in a recent novel, *Bajo el cielo nublado* (Under the cloudy sky), portrays the marimba, a wooden xylophone—a popular musical instrument of the African-ancestored population of his native province of Esmeraldas—as having an impact on the mainstream Eurocentric society that was similar to the impact of the accordion and the steel band or *tambour bamboo* in Colombia and Trinidad respectively. In this experimental and very beautiful work, certain inanimate objects and elements of nature are allowed to make their voices heard, and the marimba, speaking of itself, says, "I came from Africa, part of the black man's cultural baggage." In the epilogue of the work when the normally voiceless elements are again given voice, the marimba tells of a campaign to banish "the marimba and all other forms of disgusting African music" from the province.<sup>42</sup>

Rosa Elena Vásquez Rodríguez in a recent study (1982) of the

40. Hill, *Carnival*, 27. Liverpool, *Kaiso and Society*, 8.

41. Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso*, 11. Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural*, 38. *Tambour bamboo*, as the translation "bamboo drum" indicates, was a largely percussive form of music, which was used by the carnival masquerade bands in the period immediately prior to the days of the steel bands.

42. Nelson Estupiñán Bass, *Bajo el cielo nublado*, 15, 227.

musical tradition of Afro-Peruvians makes the interesting observation:

Although there were those cases in which blacks did become dance teachers, in parties or social gatherings the two musical traditions were entirely separate. The ruling class danced in fine halls to their waltzes, mazourkas, *jotas*, minuets, and so on, while the lower classes danced in their huts and back alleys to musical forms like the *zamacueca*, the *ingá*, the *panalivio*, or the *alcatraz*.<sup>43</sup>

The creators of the kaiso and the steel band, like those of the *vallenato* and the exponents of the many popular forms of African-inspired music in Ecuador, in Peru (as we have just shown), and in Cuba (as will be shown later), clearly distinguished between their own music and that of the Eurocentric dominant group. Forms of the *vallenato* developed from the carnival music that accompanied the “nation bands” of Afro-Colombians that paraded through the streets “jumping up [*playing mas*] and ‘wining’ to the beat of drums.”<sup>44</sup> In his analysis of the music and poetic meter used in the *vallenato*, Llerena Villalobos comes to the conclusion that the rhythm and rhyme schemes do not obey the traditional laws of Hispanic verse but rather appear to reflect the musical patterns of African oral poetry<sup>45</sup>—the loose and (to non-African eyes) spontaneous following of the drumbeat to which Atilla referred.

Another important link between the *vallenato* and the kaiso can be established through the nineteenth-century Colombian poet Candelario Obeso (1849–1884). In a very useful book on the poet that appeared recently, Laurence E. Prescott firmly establishes that the innovative scribal Afro-Hispanic poetry created by Obeso is deeply rooted in the popular oral poetry of the region: “The meter and verse forms employed by Obeso in his *Cantos populares* clearly show the book’s source of inspiration to be the popular culture.”<sup>46</sup> The very title Obeso gives his primary collection of poems, *Cantos populares de mi tierra* (Popular songs of my province), is evidence enough of his central creative thrust. The region is the same one that produced the *vallenato*, and the popular oral forms in which

43. Rosa Elena Vásquez Rodríguez, *La práctica musical de la población negra en Perú*, 24.

44. Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural*, 41. The Spanish original is “dando brincos y haciendo contorsiones.” This strongly suggests the Trinidad and Tobago expressions “jumping up” and “wining,” the latter referring to the kind of dancing that involves intense gyrations of the hips.

45. *Ibid.*, 54.

46. Laurence E. Prescott, *Candelario Obeso y la iniciación de la poesía negra en Colombia*, 137.

Obeso's poetry was rooted are the direct antecedents of the contemporary *vallenato*. Obeso's exemplary artistic evolution from orality to the written form not only preceded Nicolás Guillén's by almost half a century but took an exactly analogous direction. The similarity in direction can be better appreciated and fully elucidated in and through the links between kaiso, *vallenato*, the Cuban *son*, and Nicolás Guillén's contemporary so-called Afro-Cuban poetry, which is precisely the burden of this book.

The linkage between kaiso and *vallenato* necessarily encompasses the question of the other popular oral poetic forms developed by African-ancestored South Americans: the *décimas*, for example. Henry J. Richards and Teresa Cajiao Salas make a convincing case in their *Asedios a la poesía de Nicomedes Santa Cruz* that the contemporary Afro-Peruvian poet Nicomedes Santa Cruz accomplished his creative evolution from orality to the written form on the basis of the Peruvian popular *décima*. In the province of Esmeraldas on the Pacific coast of Ecuador, a province where that country's African-ancestored population is concentrated and where the marimba flourishes, the *décima* is the preferred form of oral poetic expression, as the Ecuadorean critic Laura Hidalgo Alzamora makes clear.<sup>47</sup> The trail of linkages is a long and compellingly interesting one that will provide material for volumes of future studies.



The trail has led to the common source of the literariness of Obeso, the nineteenth-century Colombian, and Guillén, the twentieth-century Cuban. The source is popular, it is Pan-Caribbean, and it is neo-African. This first chapter has sought to articulate and validate the premise on which my book rests. The following chapters will elaborate this premise as the basis of my critique of Nicolás Guillén's poetic creativity. They will show how the areas of essential literariness spring from a common Pan-Caribbean, neo-African source. This is the same source from which springs all of the most characteristic creativity of the region, including that of the popular oral poets or singers. Thus the development from orality to the written form, which is the central thrust of all contemporary African, neo-African, and indeed post-colonial literature, will be adequately examined in Guillén. It will be seen as representative and exemplary in the Caribbean context—as it is, indeed, in most Third World contexts. The focus of the examination of Guillén's Pan-

47. Henry J. Richards and Teresa Cajiao Salas, *Asedios a la poesía de Nicomedes Santa Cruz*. Laura Hidalgo Alzamora, *Décimas esmeraldeñas: Recopilación y análisis socio-literario*.

Caribbean poetic art will be a set of symbols or archetypal figures on which this poetic expression is based, and around which it revolves.

Chapter 2, "The Poet," will explore a Caribbean theory of poetry with a view to showing how Guillén's art conforms in technical as well as thematic aspects to the norms established by the regional culture. The theoretical tone of the discussion in this chapter is set by Roger D. Abrahams's recent book, but the basic insights spring from my personal informal interviews with Mazisi Kunene and the more traditionally academic contact with Stephen Henderson through his 1972 book on the new black poetry of North America.<sup>48</sup> The more recent contributions of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have been of invaluable assistance. It is demonstrable that in the Caribbean region, as well as in North America, there has been a thriving oral literature. This literature is an essentially neo-African expression. In North America it has clearly been the fount of the creativity of the most highly recognized black poets. One of these poets, Langston Hughes, had a most transcendental impact on Guillén; in fact he literally triggered Guillén's turning to the *son* as the vehicle for his most original poetic expression. The *son* on which Guillén based his most significant work is simply one of the many popular, neo-African oral poetic forms of the Caribbean region. For this reason it is clearly a Pan-Caribbean expression. The corresponding scribal form is itself quintessentially Pan-Caribbean and at the same time is the poet's most personal, original, and powerful contribution. Poetry for Guillén, then, is exactly the same thing in structure and basic function as it is for the ordinary woman or man in the Caribbean. Guillén the poet is the *sonero* par excellence, his most pivotal poetic collection being precisely *El son entero* (The complete *son*), a title that would be exactly analogous to "The Complete Reggae" or "The Complete Kaiso."

Chapter 3, "The Smartman," argues essentially that the humor central to Guillén's art in fact springs from a Pan-Caribbean, neo-African, popular source. The scholar whose work triggered the final shape of this chapter is Henry Louis Gates, Jr. He has shown that the popular humor of African-ancestored North Americans has profound structural underpinnings in the traditional theologies and philosophies of African cultures. An analogous set of traditional

48. Roger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture*. Mazisi Kunene is a Zulu poet, essayist, and general man of letters who was my senior colleague and mentor at UCLA. Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*.

African perspectives explains the characteristic humor in Guillén's work, as well as in some peculiarly Caribbean popular cultural expressions—the Trinidadian kaiso, the Cuban *son*, and those expressions studied by Abrahams in Saint Vincent, for example. The figure of the trickster (or the “smartman” in Trinidad) is central to this humor, this African approach to the human condition. The trickster, the smartman, the “signifying monkey” are ultimately forms of Esu-Elegbara, one of the many names for the central *loa* or *orisba*, the “god of indeterminacy.”<sup>49</sup> Examination of Guillén's poetry will show that he fully understands the fundamental role of laughter in the aesthetics of African and African-ancestored peoples and that, either consciously or unconsciously, he has structured his art on the theoretical underpinnings of this aesthetics.

Chapter 4, “The Hero,” will show how the Pan-Caribbean creative process has produced the most important poetic persona, a representative regional hero, a *cimarrón* (maroon) par excellence, Jesús Menéndez.<sup>50</sup> Jesús was an actual person, sprung from the central socioeconomic reality of the Caribbean, the plantation, the history of sugar and slavery. However, his most impressive Caribbeaness lies in the aesthetic dimension, the formal and thematic factors used by Guillén to change him from a man of flesh and blood into a poetic persona and a symbol. The formative process employs, for example, the technique of personification of animate as well as inanimate phenomena, vestiges of so-called animism. Central to the process, too, are religious syncretism and the practical orientation of the artistic impulse, two significant features of the neo-African worldview. In fact, an integrally related aspect of this latter structural factor is the merging of art and the real world on which it is posited. Guillén is himself, as an artist in a colonized culture, a hero, a *cimarrón*. Furthermore, he was a friend of Jesús Menéndez and a fellow activist in the political socioeconomic realm. A similar merging of essential poetic style with the real-life personality of the creator can be posited in the case of the smartman figure, for Guillén is both the creator of smartmen and a smartman artist. All of the preceding technical traits are essential to the art of numerous Caribbean poets, both those who work in the popular oral realm and those who write. Of course, the theme of the neoplantation is quintessentially Caribbean. Menéndez was a Caribbean labor leader

49. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, 285–321 (287).

50. The term *cimarrón* is the Spanish equivalent of *maroon*; it refers to those captured Africans who effected their own liberation through a physical separation from the sites of the dehumanizing institution of slavery.

in the tradition of Trinidad and Tobago's Uriah Buzz Butler, of Jamaica's Alexander Bustamante, of Panama's Preston Stoute, and of countless others. He is the epitome of the twentieth-century *cimarrón*, one of a large group of important figures that spans the entire history of the Caribbean: L'Ouverture, Bogle, Cudjoe, and Castro, to name but a few. In both the oral and scribal literature of the region, hero figures like Jesús Menéndez are of paramount importance.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the *mujer nueva* (new woman), another important symbol in Guillén's poetry, which demonstrates that the essential substance of Guillén's literariness is exactly coterminous with the distinguishing core of all Caribbean literariness, scribal as well as oral. This figure represents the poet's most complete expression of his commitment to African cultural values, a commitment that he himself views as a process of *mulatez* (or "mulatto-ness"). However, it can be shown that the image of the woman presented, as well as the approach to the relationship between the sexes that is revealed, are both consistent with the core sensibility of other Caribbean poets, who can themselves be considered representative of the entire region. This sensibility enters, then, into the defining element of Caribbeanness. In addition to thematic consistency, the elaboration of the image is achieved through techniques such as humanization and special rhythmic effects, which are used by other poets of the region and which can be demonstrated to be structurally related to certain defining features of African and neo-African worldviews.

In Chapter 6, "The Central Creative Conflict, *Mulatez*," the conclusion will hopefully suggest itself. It can be reduced to the following chain of argumentation. Many taboos militate against clarity and the sense of reality in theoretical approaches to Caribbean culture and life today. One of these is the dogma that the Greater Antilles is culturally separate from the Lesser Antilles, the separation being largely, but not solely, based on the differences in the European languages spoken, officially.<sup>51</sup> If the fundamental proposition advanced in this book is convincing, then it would be generally accepted that Nicolás Guillén, Poeta Nacional of Cuba and thus the popular poet par excellence in that socialist, democratic republic, and the president of his nation's National Union of Artists and

51. This argument obviously falls short in the case of Haiti, where the language of the masses is clearly Creole, not any more European than it is African. Recently, with the recognition of Papiamentu as an official language of Curaçao, the ties between Haiti and one of the islands of the Lesser Antilles became extremely strong and the old dogma became correspondingly weaker.

Writers, would have to be as well a popular poet of the Caribbean.<sup>52</sup> He would belong to the group that includes popular oral poets such as the Mighty Sparrow, Black Stalin, Celia Cruz, Johnny Ventura, Bob Marley, and Beny Moré, as well as popular scribal poets such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Claude McKay, Jacques Roumain, Gerardo Maloney, among many others.



This book, then, will seek to analyze the poetry of Nicolás Guillén from the perspective of a peculiarly Caribbean sensibility, using what we might tentatively label a Caribbean literary theory. The literary theory will, in the spirit of Alejo Carpentier's vision, be "invented" as the book proceeds. The existence of the Caribbean sensibility is inextricably linked to this literary theory and has been discussed, if not demonstrated, in this chapter. It is not possible to *demonstrate*, in the proper sense of the term, the existence of a Pan-Caribbean identity and culture. This question has to be approached with the spirit of Aimé Césaire's defiant if somewhat immature declaration "Take me as I am. I don't adapt myself to you!"<sup>53</sup> My approach to Guillén is exactly analogous to the popular approach to the kaiso. The ultimate determiner of the artistic merits of the kaiso, as Atilla is at pains to point out, is the vox populi: "The judges who decided on your excellence or otherwise was [*sic*] the general public, the sternest and most merciless adjudicators as they have always been since history began."<sup>54</sup> There is in place an appreciating principle in the case of the kaiso, as in the case of all the popular literary forms. In fact, this appreciating principle has been invoked, indirectly at least, in Warner's book and in Rohlehr's articles on the kaiso, as well as in Llerena Villalobos's book on the *vallenato*; their studies could not have been conceived otherwise. Furthermore, Rohlehr presents his book on Edward Kamau Brathwaite as an act of *cimarronaje* ("maroon-ness") in the arena of literary scholarship: it is published in defiance of the "plantation" press. It must, then, also invoke the Pan-Caribbean appreciating principle as the definer of literariness and the measure of literary worth.

In this book, I will do so explicitly. I will analyze the poetry of Nicolás Guillén using my training and experience in the discipline

52. According to Antonio Benítez-Rojo, a Cuban writer and literary critic, Nicolás Guillén was also a "Deputy of the National Assembly and Member of [the] Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba" ("Nicolás Guillén and Sugar," 345).

53. Aimé Césaire, *Cabier d'un retour au pays natal. Return to My Native Land*, 86.

54. Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso*, 84.

of literary criticism along with the sensibility of the people who assess the *kaiso*. The resulting study will be a practical example of Caribbean literary criticism; based on a Caribbean literary theory, it will represent a radical development in that theory. At best, this book will be a convincing demonstration and a thought-provoking exposition. At worst, it will be one man's view of and critical approximation to the uncontested beauty of Nicolás Guillén's poetry. In either case it will advance the cause of Caribbean literary criticism.



 2 

## The Poet

**A**rt plays an important part in the day-to-day life of the Caribbean peoples, and nowhere is this more evident than in the sphere of literary art. If there is real literary value in what are commonly seen as mere popular songs of the Caribbean folk—the kaiso, the *son*, the *merengue*, and so on—then the question of Guillén's conformity to that value must be brought into precise focus. The question I will pose in this chapter is, In what ways is Guillén as a poet essentially similar to the most representative poets of the region, both in the oral and in the scribal mediums?

□ □ □

The very title of Roger D. Abrahams's work, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*, firmly postulates that there does exist a Caribbean approach to poetry. Abrahams studies the ways in which the popular cultures of Nevis, Saint Vincent, and Tobago handle the verbal arts. He finds these cultures to be essentially Afro-American, that is, defined by the African presence and similar to other African cultural manifestations in North, South, and Central America. He claims:

The importance of effective speaking in Afro-American communities has been testified to repeatedly by outside observers. In such communities, the eloquent speaker is capable of garnering a great deal of power, respect, and in many cases admiration through his artful speaking. . . . Furthermore, recent descriptions of African village life and expressive culture encourage us to look to that continent as the primary source for the Afro-American valuing of eloquence.<sup>1</sup>

1. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words*, 21.

Abrahams sees two basic kinds of eloquence: "broad talk," associated with macho, boastful, disruptive, crossroads values; and "sweet talk," associated with female, household, home-centered stability, and all celebrations "related to a rite of passage or some other crisis in the life of the individual."<sup>2</sup> The former relies on Creole; the other, on the standard varieties of English. This distinction is accorded much importance by Abrahams and undoubtedly has some functional value, but, clearly, the creators of written Caribbean literature (such as Guillén, McKay, Brathwaite, and so on) have not paid too much heed to it.

Abrahams himself has a way with words, especially those significant terms that constitute his titles (of the book itself and of the individual chapters). Two chapter titles are particularly eloquent: chapter 4, "Joking: The Training of the Man-of-Words in *Talking Broad*," and its complement, chapter 8, entitled "The Training of the Man-of-Words in *Talking Sweet*." One of the most fundamental and pervasive misconceptions about Afro-Americans—and it is a stereotype that has been accepted uncritically by many Afro-Americans themselves—is that their cultural expressions are most characteristic and "authentic" when they are truly spontaneous. Abrahams gives the lie to this misconception not only with his titles, but also with the well-argued content of these two pertinent chapters. The high degree of effortless spontaneity, verbal wit, and repartee, in broad talk as well as in sweet talk, is achieved through a rigorous and systematic training process, one devised and operated entirely by the unlettered people of the community:

By playing the fool or by describing the antics of the trickster Anansi, the broad talker therefore enacts something of an antiritual for the community; he produces a needed sense of classless liminality and serves as a creative channel for antisocial community motives. Furthermore, by giving him this power, the community provides itself with a set of people who bring a sense of liminality upon the entire participating group, permitting them to forget themselves under special circumstances (like Carnival or Christmas revels) and to enter into the licentious occasion. The importance of this lapsing of the social order for its eventual reorganization is crucial to an understanding not only of the festival but also such licentious ceremonies as wakes.<sup>3</sup>

Abrahams shows, too, that the crude broad-talk rhyming sessions indulged in by adolescents are themselves but a part of this larger scheme of things organized by the culture. He interprets them as an ordered training experience: "They permit a trying-on of mature

2. *Ibid.*, 35.

3. *Ibid.*, 58.

roles in the safety of peer-group confines while arming the young men with weapons useful in adult life." The orator or sweet talker, whose skill is demonstrated essentially by his ability to remain elegantly cool and eloquent in the face of heckling and general extemporaneous abusive participation by his audience, has himself learned this control in a very structured setting, that is, from a teacher. Abrahams demonstrates this irrefutably with the data he has collected from his research in Saint Vincent among the masters of ceremonies at tea meetings.<sup>4</sup> It must be borne in mind that the extemporaneous heckling of the "rude boys," the "shit talkers," the jokers in the audience, is itself the end product of a structured learning process.

Mazisi Kunene in 1973 indicated to me the significance of this kind of analysis.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Stephen Henderson's book *Understanding the New Black Poetry* establishes how central this analysis is to any critical theory that would explicate the Afro-American literary enterprise. Henderson analyzes the new black poetry under the basic rubrics of theme and structure, and he asserts, "Structurally speaking, however, whenever Black poetry is most distinctly and effectively *Black*, it derives its form from two basic sources, Black speech and Black music." Black speech, he goes on to say, includes both the high and low codes, indeed, "the entire range of Black spoken language in America. This includes the techniques and timbres of the sermon and other forms of oratory, the dozens, the rap, the signifying, and the oral folktale."<sup>6</sup> The "referent" black speech is, of course, intimately related to the other "referent," black music.

The filial relationship between Afro-American popular oral and scribal literatures is explored in Henderson's work, as it is in the works of scholars such as Martha K. Cobb, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and many others.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has developed the same approach in a manner more closely related to the structuralist and post-structuralist current in contemporary literary theory. He shows the profoundly systemic connections between African and neo-African theologies and philosophies and Afro-American literatures, both oral and scribal. For Gates, the focal

4. *Ibid.*, 60, 114.

5. During the course of my graduate studies from 1971 to 1975 at UCLA, I had the honor of meeting this distinguished man of letters from South Africa. It was my privilege to have many discussions with Mazisi Kunene at that time.

6. Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 30-31.

7. See Martha K. Cobb, *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana: A Comparative Critical Study of Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and Nicolás Guillén*, esp. chaps. 1-3, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature."

point of this productive network of connections is the Trickster-Legba complex of symbols. (These ideas are further developed in Chapters 3 and 4.) The most consciously artistic connection that Gates appears to have found is Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, a novel "about writing itself—not only in the figurative sense of the post-modern self-reflexive text but also in a literal sense." The central "speaking character" of this novel is called PaPa LaBas, and "PaPa LaBas's name is a conflation of two of the several names of Esu, the Pan-African trickster. Called 'Papa Legba' as his Haitian honorific and invoked through the phrase 'eh là-bas' in the New Orleans jazz recordings of the 1920s and 1930s, PaPa LaBas is the Afro-American trickster figure from black sacred tradition."<sup>8</sup>

The fascinating theoretical constructs that Gates offers, of course, explicate what was already praxis in Langston Hughes's art by the time he and Guillén first met in January 1930. And the significance of Hughes's art was not lost on the young Guillén, who was then intensely seeking his own authentic voice. In his newspaper article "Conversación con Langston Hughes" (Conversation with Langston Hughes), Guillén reports that Hughes was the "black people's poet," in spite of his mulatto appearance—Guillén says he "looked just like a Cuban '*mulatico*.'" He had, in fact, made the Afro-American oral literary tradition the basis of his own authentic black scribal poetry. Guillén reports with enthusiasm, "His *jazz poems*, his *blues poems* and his *spirituals* are characteristic." Guillén ends his brief article with an anecdote about Hughes's consuming desire to find a place in Havana where he could hear "real black music." The American, literally enthralled, gazed fixedly at a bongo player "as black as the night" and exclaimed "with a sigh of anguished longing: 'How I would like to be black. Real black. Authentic black!'"<sup>9</sup> Within three months of his meeting with Hughes, Guillén set himself on the same course and discovered his own authentic voice, creating the *son* poem with the verbal rhythm of the Cuban people's best-known oral poetic form, the *son*.

It is interesting that, unbeknownst to Guillén, an analogous rapprochement between the popular Afro-based culture of the masses and the somewhat esoteric Euro-based literate culture of the dominant minority was already occurring in the English-language Caribbean novel.<sup>10</sup> The clearest manifestation of this was the creation of African female protagonists, the first of whom was Jane of H. G. De Lisser's *Jane's Career* (1914). The most important of these new

8. Gates, *Black Literature*, 298, 300.

9. Nicolás Guillén, *Prosa de prisa 1929-1972*, 1:16, 19.

10. See Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, 51-74.

West Indian protagonists is probably Bitá (Tabitha) Plant of Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933). G. R. Coulthard claims that this process of rapprochement originated in Haiti, the source of so much that is authentic in neo-African American culture: "It is in the literature of Haiti that we find the first deliberate and self-conscious evaluation of the beauty of the black woman."<sup>11</sup> He cites Pierre Faubert's poem "The Negress" (1868) and Oswald Durand's poem "Our Country Girls" (1898) as the first works in which the non-European persona is given central importance, a clear departure from the Eurocentric literary tradition. The crucial significance of the female persona in the development of Guillén's own authentically Caribbean poetry will be explored in my chapter "The *Mujer Nueva*."

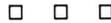
The fact is that throughout the entire Caribbean region, and, indeed, throughout the entire African world, there was a resurgence of soul-searching creativity that more or less coincided chronologically with Guillén's own creative awakening. In 1928, for example, Jean Price-Mars published his powerful *Thus Spoke the Uncle*, which changed the face of Haitian letters, closing the gap between the masses and the lettered elite. In the late 1920s a group of Trinidadian writers including C. L. R. James also began to close the culture gap.<sup>12</sup> Most significantly from the standpoint of the history of Western literature, in the early 1930s Caribbean students in Paris met their brothers from the African continent and from North America and created the literary movement they called Négritude.

The catalyst that caused Guillén's subsequent creative explosion was his meeting with Hughes in 1930, his first encounter with this cultural ferment. Obviously, some of it had already had an impact on him, for he was clearly influenced by Luis Palés Matos's version of so-called Afro-Antillean poetry, which first appeared in 1925. In the years immediately prior to Guillén's own artistic explosion, white-skinned Cubans had caught the contagion from Palés Matos, their Puerto Rican counterpart. They had gone into an almost frenzied state of creativity, producing exotic, erotic verses in which the black female persona of generously proportioned hips and *nalgas* (posterior) literally held sway, exuding earthy, sultry sensuality. In fact, as early as 1928, the white-skinned Cuban Ramón Guirao published an anthology of Afro-Cuban poetry of this type. His 1939 *Orbita de la poesía afrocubana* (The Afro-Cuban poetic orbit) best conserves for us the flavor of this poetry, whose chief exponents were Alejo Carpentier, José Z. Tallet, Emilio Ballagas, and, of

11. George R. Coulthard, *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature*, 87-88.  
 12. See Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, 63.

course, Guirao himself. Understandably, Guillén and other African-ancestored Cubans, writers like Regino Pedroso and Marcelino Arozarena as well as the general public, were somewhat uncomfortable with this phenomenon.

Guillén's encounter with Hughes, the mulatto who declared himself the black man's poet, was the inspiration Guillén needed to leave behind all this artistic ferment and to harness its power for a constructive artistic advance. It was this contact that irrevocably shaped Guillén's poetic vocation, showing him the way to the *son*.



The *son* provides a perfect example of an oral literary process influencing scribal literature to create a truly Caribbean expression. Basically the *son* is a type of dance song developed by Africans in Hispanic America. The oldest known example is the popular "Son de la Ma Teodora," which dates back to 1586 and which Alejo Carpentier portrays as "the only composition that can give us an idea of what Cuban popular music was like in the sixteenth century."<sup>13</sup> It is characterized by a call-response pattern between the lead soloist and the accompanying group. Its melody closely resembles those of the romances of the old province of Extremadura in Spain, and the metric pattern of the lyrics is typically Hispanic. Carpentier sees this phenomenon as clear evidence of acculturation in Cuba, the wedding of European and African elements.

According to Carpentier's analysis, one main factor accounts for the difference between the "Son de la Ma Teodora" and the contemporary Cuban *son*. This is the influence of the so-called *negros franceses* (French blacks), African-ancestored Haitians who went to Cuba with the white slaveholders deposed by Toussaint's revolution. As musicologist, Carpentier uses a musical form called *cinquillo*—which he claims to be of evident African provenance—as an index of the contribution made by the Haitians. And he concludes that this contribution resulted in the accelerated evolution of popular oral literary expressions in Cuba, bringing to life many new forms. Many of these (the *danzón*, a derivative of the *contradanza*, is a notable example) passed into the European-oriented mainstream of Cuban culture, suffering a diminution of their original African elements.<sup>14</sup> However, the *son* stayed in the *barracones* (slave barracks) with the African-ancestored Cubans and began to reach the

13. Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*, 36.

14. *Ibid.*, 103. In Chapter 1, I made the point that the separation of Eurocentric from Afrocentric musical/literary expressions is fundamental in the Manichaean colonial society.

wider Cuban public only in the twentieth century. It is thus, according to Carpentier, the purest of the forms.

This history of the *son* is significant. In the first instance it confirms the declarations of many artists and intellectuals to the effect that Haiti is the primary source of inspiration for all that is best in Afro-American culture. Aimé Césaire in his pivotal *Return to My Native Land* declared that Haiti is the place where “Negritude stood up for the first time and swore by its humanity.” Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* makes Haiti the source of Jes Grew, the essential Afro-American “soul.” Also, even more pertinent to our central thesis, in almost every respect the history of the *son* parallels that of the Trinidad carnival and the intimately connected kaiso. Errol Hill says pointedly, “it is unlikely that carnival was a popular occurrence in the island before the year 1783, which marked the arrival of French-speaking planter immigrants and their African slaves. There is no available evidence on the observance of carnival before that date.” He goes on to assert: “According to legend, the calypso was introduced in Trinidad at the time of the French settlement of the island in the late eighteenth century. The first shantwell, Gros Jean, was appointed ‘Maitre Kaiso’ to Pierre Begorrat, who had come from Martinique in 1784.” When the French-speaking European planters introduced their version of carnival, which itself springs from ancient African religious rites, the neo-African people recognized it as their own and remade it into, as the poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite put it in the very last words of *Islands*, “some- / thing torn / and new.”<sup>15</sup> In the late 1930s the Trinidad steel band arose out of the tumbledown Port-of-Spain slums, a symbol of the indomitable spirit of creativeness, the untiring instinct to live and not merely survive, in conditions that militated against even mere survival. The *son* spread from Santiago to all of Cuba’s *barracones* and kept buoyant the beleaguered spirit of an enslaved and economically deprived people.

In her recent book, Vera Kutzinski avers the central position of carnival in the Guillenesque aesthetic. Her focus is indicated by the title of her chapter on Guillén, “The Carnivalization of Poetry: Nicolás Guillén’s Chronicles.” Another scholar, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, takes his cue from Kutzinski (as he acknowledges in a note) and affirms, “If I were asked to define, in a few words, the most recent texts by Guillén, I would say that they spring from a carnivalesque origin.” Of course, this was precisely the burden of Kutzinski’s long chapter, namely, the explication of the carnivalesque

15. Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour*, 66. Hill, *Carnival*, 6, 56. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, 270.

origin of Guillén's *El diario que a diario* (The daily daily), begun in 1970 and first published in 1972. This work is perhaps the most significant of the poet's later writings. Benítez-Rojo continues, "If those latest texts by Guillén—above all *El gran zoo* (1967), *El diario que a diario* [The Daily Daily] (1972), and *Sol de domingo* [Sunday's Sun] (1982)—were to be translated into a visual image that would represent them, say, an icon, I would choose a lithograph that is one of the most extraordinary works of Antillean art: *Día de Reyes* by Federico Mialhe, printed in 1848."<sup>16</sup> The *Día de Reyes*, the Feast of the Epiphany, was one of the occasions when Afro-Cubans of the colonial period were permitted by the European slaveholders to give expression to their cultural heritage. This expression took the same form as in the New World African-influenced carnivals.

In fact, Kutzinski sees the *Día de Reyes* carnival snake dance as fundamental inspiration for the obviously related poem by Guillén, "Sensemayá: Canción para matar a una culebra" (Sensemayá: Song for killing a snake), and she builds a trail of interpretation through "El abuelo" (The grandfather), "West Indies, Ltd.," and "El apellido" (The surname) leading to the entire book *El diario que a diario*. The central connecting symbol is the carnival snake dance, which can be considered an image "of the historic confrontation between African slaves and their Spanish masters."<sup>17</sup> Kutzinski's arguments are brilliant and are couched in the preferred language of the most recent trends in Eurocentric North American literary theory. They also substantiate my thesis.<sup>18</sup> Her disquisition on "Sensemayá" could be even further enriched, however, with a consideration of the antiquity of the poem's principal thematic and formal elements.

E. A. Wallis Budge, one of those famed Egyptologists of the old guard—an incorrigibly colonial Britisher who was fervently convinced of the fundamental Africanness of the ancient Egyptians—reports on the Pyramid Text associated with Teta, containing a spell that was used against the serpent Tcheser-țetă, which begins:

Rā rises on thee. Horus has stretched his nine bows against this spirit which comes forth from the earth. The head is cut, the tail is severed, Tcheser-țetă, son of Serqet-hetu. Thou circlest, thou art overturned, thou art destroyed by him, Hefen, Hefnent. He hears, the earth hears, thy father Kēb hears. If thou hearest not him thou hearest his . . . in thy head. Serāu, lie down! If the hand of the deceased seizes thee thou diest, if his hand

16. Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain*, 131–235. Benítez-Rojo, "Nicolás Guillén and Sugar," 345.

17. Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain*, 150.

18. I use the term *thesis* in its fullest possible sense, for this thesis was, in fact, central to my Ph.D dissertation, "The Creative Dialogue."

touches thee thou dost not live. Shu stands on thy fetters; thou circlest, thou art overturned. The fingers of the deceased are on thee, the fingers of the Lynx which dwells in the House of Life. Thou spittest, fall down, retreat, be overturned! Horus tramples on thee, thou livest not; Set hacks at thee, thou standest not up.<sup>19</sup>

This poem from the Sixth Dynasty in Egypt is a markedly rhythmic expression, the infectious rhythm being created principally by the repetition of words and images. The rhythm can be described as vigorous and intense. It empowers the word to effect the desired result, namely, the killing of the snake: "thou livest not . . . thou standest not up."

Guillén's "Sensemayá" is exactly the same kind of artistic product, a "canto para matar a una culebra."<sup>20</sup> It is an eminently rhythmic expression, an incantation or spell, and it is the rhythm that empowers the words to work their artistic magic and bring about the demise of the serpent, "*Sensemaya, no se mueve... / . . . Sensemaya, se murió*" (Sensemayá, it's not moving / . . . Sensemayá, it's quite dead). Guillén's poem opens with the famous, apparently nonsense line "¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!" repeated three times. As in the ancient Egyptian poem, the snake is named and made present in all its vital details. Its vitality is then systematically negated:

la culebra viene y se enreda en un palo;  
 .....

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

Tú le das con el hacha y se muere:  
 .....

La culebra muerta no puede comer,  
 la culebra muerta no puede silbar,  
 no puede caminar,  
 no puede correr.

La culebra muerta no puede mirar,  
 la culebra muerta no puede beber,  
 no puede respirar  
 no puede morder.  
 .....

*Sensemaya, se murió.*

(1:147-49)

19. Wallis Budge, *Osiris*, 1:142.

20. This poem is fully discussed in Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain*, 136-43.

(the snake comes and winds around a stick;  
 .....  
 The snake glides without legs;  
 the snake hides in the grass;  
 .....  
 You get him with an ax and he dies:  
 .....  
 The dead snake cannot eat,  
 the dead snake cannot hiss,  
 cannot walk,  
 cannot run.  
 The dead snake cannot see,  
 the dead snake cannot drink,  
 cannot breathe  
 cannot bite.  
 .....  
*Sensemaya, it's quite dead.*)

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Guillén's poem, clearly rooted in the culture of Afro-Cubans, is also, ipso facto, steeped in an African literary tradition as old as the recorded history of the human species.

Benítez-Rojo, although he acknowledges his status as outsider ("spectator, not . . . participant") with respect to the carnival celebration, captures as well as anyone the spirit of this neo-African festival in his listing of the "multicolored, dynamic presence of, and the explosive tension between, the components that make up carnival in the Caribbean: jokes, virtuosity, costumes, fire, blood, rum, sex, simulation, sacrilege, percussion, delirium, dance, insult, religion, parody, jumping, grimacing, sweat, triumph and humiliation, tragedy and comedy, ritual brazenness and seriousness, subversion and submission, bursts of laughter and tears, and everything contained in the streets and the rhythm."<sup>21</sup> This is, indeed, a very close approximation to the reality of carnival, the Creole bacchanal, a New World festival that unites two fundamentally African cultural strands. I suggested earlier that the pagan source of the Roman Christian carnival was the spring celebration in honor of Isis, a major African goddess. This Europeanized version of the ancient African carnivalesque rites would be one strand. The other would be the original African carnival tradition that had already been established in ancient Egypt and that millennia later was brought to the New World by captured Africans.

21. Benítez-Rojo, "Guillén and Sugar," 345.

The new *son*, one of many carnival songs and infused with miasmatic intensity bestowed by the Haitians, left the *barracones* and took Havana by storm in the 1920s. Carpentier describes it as “chant accompanied by percussion. And this undoubtedly constitutes its best guarantee of originality. Thanks to the *son*, Afro-Cuban percussion confined to the barracks and ghetto yards revealed its marvellous expressive possibilities, attaining world-class status.” Carpentier continues:

The great revolution effected by the *son* rhythm sections was to show the world how a polyrhythmic expression could be subjected to a unity of tempo. Up until then one would have spoken of the *contradanza* rhythm, the *guaracha* rhythm, the *danzón* rhythms (accepting plurality under this rubric). The *son*, however, created new categories. Within one general tempo each percussive element enjoyed autonomy. Whereas the *botijuela* and the *diente de arado* provided a basic beat, the *timbales* played out rhythmic variations. Whereas the *marimbula* worked within three or four notes, marking the harmonies with the insistence of a steady bass, the *tres* could have a cadential function. The *bongo*, played with the direct or the *glissando* style, had a more liberal role. The other elements of that rhythm section were employed in strict conformity with their individual registers and possibilities, allowing the players to give free rein to their fantasy so long as the singing—and all of the musicians sang—was at all times sustained by the apparatus of the rhythm section. The Cuban *son*—as we first knew it in its pure form, in 1920—reminds one of a rudimentary Stravinsky, the Stravinsky of *The Wedding*.<sup>22</sup>

The term *son* has been used loosely to refer to a whole variety of artistic expressions:

From the times of “Ma Teodora” it was known in the Santiago province as a kind of dance song. But between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the term *son* alluded to different kinds of popular dance music. The same thing transpired as with the *rumba*, for even the very exponents of this form have not been able to define it precisely. . . . Any expression with a 2/4 time is accepted as a *son*; more than a genre it is a feeling.

In fact the same term, *son*, is used in other parts of the Hispanic world to refer to different types of dance music. For example, the *son* is one of the four kinds of *vallenatos* in Colombia studied by Rito Llerena Villalobos. It is quite clear, however, what was the actual source of inspiration for Guillén. He himself affirmed in an interview with Nancy Morejón, “The most marked influence in the *Motivos* . . . (at least for me) is that of the Habanero Sextet and the

22. Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*, 190, 191.

Matamoros Trio.”<sup>23</sup> These two Cuban musical groups were the foremost exponents of the authentic new *son*. It is still possible to listen to their music on record and to recreate the atmosphere it must have engendered and the impact it must have made in the 1920s. In fact, these primitive *son* pieces, sung in thick Creole Spanish with an intensely nasal tone and accompanied by what to the music enthusiast of the 1990s is a very unsophisticated old-time rhythm section, are extremely reminiscent of the *kaisos* of that period.

Earlier in the same interview Guillén, briefly and significantly, described the collection of eight *son* poems *Motivos de son* (*Son motifs*): “Originally they were eight poems written with the verbal rhythm of the *son*.”<sup>24</sup> And it is clear that he understood this *son* to be the regenerated one, of more obvious African provenance and composed of elements that would restore the balance of the Cuban cultural synthesis. In fact, in a contemporaneous interview with a fellow Cuban writer, José Antonio Fernández de Castro, published in 1930, Guillén presents his artistic intentions with crystal clarity:

I have tried to incorporate into Cuban literature—not as a mere musical motif, but rather as a truly poetic element—what one could call the *son* poem, based on the technique of that dance that is so popular in our country. My *sones* can be put to music, but that is not to say that they are written precisely for that purpose, rather my aim is to present, in a form that is perhaps most fitting, some brief sketches of manners portraying popular types of the kind that live and breathe right here; portraying them exactly as they speak, exactly as they think. . . . My *son* poems also serve to give me the chance to reevaluate the only thing of our own that’s left that is truly ours, bringing it out into the open, and using it as the essential poetic element.<sup>25</sup>

Carpentier is at pains to point out the important role of voice and rhythm in the *son* of the 1920s. Since the *son* is basically a dance song, the melodic content is indispensable. However, what one understands from reading Carpentier’s analysis is that the tune or melody is not as important as the other two basic components, voice and rhythm. Atila, in his ground-breaking study of the *kaiso* from Trinidad and Tobago, makes the same suggestion about the role of the melody or tune: “The *kaisonian* is more indebted for words than melody, because certain *kaiso* tunes with slight modifications have been recurring again and again.”<sup>26</sup> Those who enjoy

23. *Ibid.*, 187–88. Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural en el vallenato*, 29. Nancy Morejón, ed., *Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén*, 41.

24. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 40.

25. Quoted in Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 90–91.

26. Quevedo, *Atila’s Kaiso*, 45.

the various oral literary forms of the Caribbean—the kaiso, the *merengue*, the reggae, the *plena*, the *vallenato*, and so on—are certainly aware that Atilla's assertion about the kaiso can be applied universally. Poetry (as distinct from music) in the Western tradition is an expression employing the two basic components of voice and rhythm. Thus, even within the narrowest Western definition, the *son* is close to poetic expression. As a neo-African form it naturally conforms to the principles of the African aesthetics.

This African aesthetics as it relates to poetry has been analyzed by the well-known Senegalese intellectual, statesman, and poet—indeed one of the three founders of the Négritude movement—Léopold Sédar Senghor. African cultures have generally been considered to place strong emphasis on rhythm. In painting and sculpture, for example, Senghor claims, “the image does not produce its effect in Negro-African culture unless it has rhythm. The rhythm is coterminous with the image, it is the rhythm that effects the image by bringing together into one whole sign, meaning, flesh, and spirit.” The emphasis on rhythm is even more pertinent in poetry, and Senghor comments:

But the essential quality of the black poetic style is the rhythm. . . . The rhythm, to repeat, is the most vital element of language: it is its first condition and its sign. Just as breathing is to life, the breathing that speeds up or slows down, becomes regular or spasmodic, in accord with the being's tension, the degree and quality of its emotion; so is rhythm in its pristine character, in its purest state, in the best, the blackest of our poets: in James Weldon Johnson, for example.<sup>27</sup>

Senghor's analysis, of course, exemplifies the kind of holism he himself discerned as characteristically Negro-African, in that he makes no effort to compartmentalize his analytical and his poetic styles. However, once allowance is made for this deviation from the style—but clearly not the substance—of Western academic tradition, Senghor's essential insights remain valid.

Pursuing Senghor's line of reasoning, African poetry can be considered speech that has been more carefully imbued with rhythm: “The poem is nothing other than a prose expression with a stronger and more regular rhythm.” According to this analysis of African aesthetics, poetry is more closely linked to song, since the melody (the only distinguishing factor) yields in importance to rhythm. “In any case, the poem cannot be considered complete unless it is sung, at least made rhythmic with the aid of a musical instrument.” Music, dance, and poetry are all intimately connected. Whereas this is not

27. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 211, 111.

peculiar to African cultures, the fact is that thinkers of the caliber of Senghor consider this aspect of African cultures a part of their defining essence. These considerations are certainly relevant to our study of how the African cultural heritage inspired Guillén's poetry. The poet even reports, by way of an anecdotal aside in his interview with Nancy Morejón, that on one occasion in Paris he danced to a musical version of his poems created by Grenet, a famous Cuban composer.<sup>28</sup>

If rhythm is the essence of art, then, according to the same Senghor, the essence of rhythm is "l'unité dans la diversité" (unity in diversity). Rhythm, African or not, necessarily implies repetition. However, repetition need not be monotonous. In fact, a major characteristic of African rhythm is that the monotonous effect of repetition is negated while the emphasis-creating effect is maintained, thus effecting an enchanting intensity. This is what Senghor calls "l'unité dans la diversité." He shows how this type of rhythm characterizes Afro-American poetry:

But replaying is not just saying the same thing again, nor is it mere repetition. The word is replayed with a variation, in another place, in another group. It takes on a new accent, a different intonation, a different timbre. The effect of the whole is intensified—not without nuance. This brings to mind African singing in which a person with an ear for music soon discovers, beneath the apparent simplicity and monotony, an uncommon richness and subtlety.<sup>29</sup>

This kind of rhythm is *vital*, and the term is used in a much stricter sense than is customary. It signals a profound connection with the Bantu philosophical system as exposed by Janheinz Jahn, Alexis Kagame, and others. The system posits that the central element of existence is not merely Being but Being-force, *Ntu*.<sup>30</sup> To describe African rhythm as vital is to tie it to the very essence of things, to recognize the kind of power it can display, in religious ceremonies, for example. In these circumstances it is the rhythm that brings on the trance and thereby makes present the *loa*, or god, in effect incarnating a spiritual being. Senghor says:

What characterizes Negro-African rhythm is precisely its *vital* character: regularity in irregularity, unity in diversity ["l'unité dans la diversité"], in

28. *Ibid.*, 213, 214. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 42. It is unclear from the reference which of the Grenet brothers, Eliseo or Emilio, actually composed this piece. It is interesting that Wallis Budge, somewhat colorfully but with fundamental accuracy, has asserted: "All Nilotic people are generally addicted to dancing" (*Osisis*, 2:231).

29. Senghor, *Liberté I*, 112.

30. See Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture*, 96–120.

short, variety under the appearance of monotony. Thanks to the *syncopations* and *changes in tempo*, the equivalents of which are to be found in the plastic arts, this rhythm, more than any other, gives expression to life. This is the famous Negro-American *swing*, that comes straight out of Africa and that highlights, here, the *polyrhythmic* character of Negro-African works.<sup>31</sup>

Carpentier used almost the same terms in describing the *son* of the 1920s as an intense polyrhythmic structure that was unified under a basic beat. In fact, the relevant Carpentier passage cited earlier ended with a comparison of the *son* to “a rudimentary Stravinsky, the Stravinsky of *The Wedding*.” Carpentier thereby manifested the Eurocentrism of his perspective. A familiarity with the theories generated specifically through the study of African and neo-African artistic expressions would have obviated such an unscientific value judgment that weakens the analytical process.

Senghor further elaborates on the character of rhythm in African and neo-African poetry:

Undoubtedly Negro-African poetic meter is not built either on quantity or on the number of syllables. Nor, indeed, were old Germanic and Egyptian poetry, just to mention these two cases.

No one would deny that the essential quality of verse is the rhythm. This is not produced only by alternating short and long syllables. It can rest just as well—and this was in part the case with Greco-Roman verse, a fact that is too often forgotten—on the alternating of accented and unaccented syllables, of weak and of strong periods. This is the case with Negro-African rhythm (at least in the Senegalo-Guinean group that I studied). Verse and poetry are produced when an accented syllable is repeated in the same interval of time. We are talking here about the stress of intensity, not of height. In a regular poem, each verse has the same number of accents. But the essential rhythm, and it is this that gives its special character to the Negro-African poem, is not that of the words, but that of the percussion instruments accompanying the human voice, more precisely of those instruments that provide the base rhythm.<sup>32</sup>

His contact with the *son* taught Guillén these principles of neo-African rhythm in an instinctive way, without the need to articulate them or, indeed, to be fully conscious of their existence as a clearly elucidated system. Guillén was simply aware that he was creating a scribal Hispanic verse infused with “the verbal rhythm” of the *son*.

Guillén’s first *son* poem, “Negro bembón” (Liverlip black man), occurred to him in an almost trancelike state on an April night in 1930, and the entire “handful of poems—eight or ten” were written

31. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 281.

32. *Ibid.*, 169.

within twelve hours of that midnight inspiration.<sup>33</sup> His fit of inspiration on that night in 1930 preceded by at least two decades the dissemination of Senghor's speculations on Negro-African and Negro-American poetic rhythm. In terms of Hispanic literary tradition, Guillén's poem "Negro bembón" is a *seguidilla compuesta*, the verse form made up of seven- and eight-syllable lines most usually employed in dance songs. However, the rhythm of Guillén's poem is not merely Euro-Hispanic; the African drums sound loud and clear.

There has always existed some affinity between the poetic rhythm of scribal Hispanic poetry and the pulsating beats of popular oral poetic expressions such as the *son*, so the marriage that Guillén effected is not such an incongruous one. African verse, according to Senghor, is based on "the alternating of accented and nonaccented syllables, of strong and weak periods," and a similar case has been made for Spanish verse vis-à-vis French verse, for example. Rudolf Baehr, an expert on Spanish versification, asserts, "In accord with the phonetic characteristics of the language, accent . . . clearly determines Spanish verse, even more so than is the case, for example, with French verse."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, theoreticians like the famous Tomás Navarro Tomás and his disciples (of whom Baehr is one) claim that metric irregularity is an autochthonous feature of the Spanish language, in contrast to French and even Italian.<sup>35</sup> The underlying affinity was picked up by Jahn, who declared, "Thanks to its wealth of short-sounding vowels, the Spanish language has been able to assimilate African words and phrases without marking them off as foreign. Thanks to the possibility of sharp accents, in contrast to French, African rhythm has been able to make itself at home in Spanish."<sup>36</sup>

Even granting the accentual nature of Spanish poetry, it is certainly not accentual in the same way Senghor considers African poetry to be. Some experts (Andrés Bello, for example) have posited

33. Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 85-86.

34. Rudolf Baehr, *Manual de la versificación española*, 24.

35. In this regard, they speak of a *sosilabismo* in French and Italian poetry as against the Hispanic *ansosilabismo* (see Baehr, *Manual*, 24).

36. Jahn, *Muntu*, 94. Jahn does not mention that historically Africa has made profound contributions to Spanish poetry. In the field of medieval letters, the discovery of the *jarchas* has revealed the existence of a romance lyric poetry that predates the Provençal and the Gallego-Portuguese. There seem to be clear indications that Spanish lyric poetry originated as an offshoot of an earlier Moorish, that is, African tradition. In the course of the history of Spanish culture, Africans of sub-Saharan origin have also left their mark on Hispanic poetics and on the Spanish theater. For more on this, see Miriam DeCosta, *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: Critical Essays*, and Wayne B. Chandler, "The Moor: Light of Europe's Dark Age."

an analysis of Spanish versification based solely on feet: iambs, anapests, and even amphibrachs. Of course (as Samuel Gili y Gaya points out) they were “pies intensivos” based on accent and not on “cantidad silábica” as were the classical and neoclassical feet.<sup>37</sup> In Senghor’s view, an analysis in terms of feet, whether intensive or quantitative, would be unsuited to neo-African verse. Neo-African rhythm goes well beyond the possibilities of traditional Hispanic verse, which admits only two accentual patterns, the dactylic and the trochaic, out of which all other rhythms have to be woven. Senghor’s “l’unité dans la diversité” is a complex pattern of rhythms and cross-rhythms based on a binary system of accent versus non-accent. So the African and neo-African sense of rhythm, starting from the same material as does the Hispanic (accent versus non-accent), achieves an entirely different result even though some of the means are the same.



The original “Negro bembón” begins with a declamatory verse, rich in repetition of the nasal, resonant vowel *o*, bilabial stops both voiced and unvoiced, and the voiceless dental *t*:

¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,  
cuando te disen negro bembón,  
si tiene la boca santa,  
negro bembón?

(1:103)

This stanza corresponds to the introductory *largo* of the *son* dance song as analyzed by Carpentier. The *largo* was normally sung by one voice, that of the lead singer, in a nasal dramatic thrust that was followed by “the nervous reaction of the rhythm section”—the famous Afro-Cuban rhythm section mentioned earlier. Then came the second part of the song, the *montuno*, the main rhythmic and melodic section. Carpentier describes it in part: “and the voices all began together, establishing the *montuno*, the primitive old call-response form.”<sup>38</sup> It is based on the refrain sung by the chorus in answer to the lead singer.

In the poem at hand the introductory stanza, the *largo*, contains two lines of eight syllables each, which alternate first with a ten-syllable line and then with the five-syllable refrain. They could be said to be in a mixed dactylic and trochaic rhythm, but this would be to understate the complexity of the rhythm attained by the

37. Samuel Gili y Gaya, *El ritmo en la poesía contemporánea*, 49.

38. Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*, 192.

repetition of sounds, especially the nasal sound. The *montuno* that follows is a *seguidilla*. However, embellished with the techniques of the neo-African tradition, it becomes much more than that. The rhythm is established on the basis of the same phonetic elements as in the *largo*, with the addition of the call-response form, the repeated lines, both terminating in a stressed *o*. In the case of the last stanza, the word *bembón* attains an even greater resonance, with its stressed *o* followed by a nasal sound. The interplay between the heptasyllabic line and the pentasyllabic choral refrain intensifies the cross-rhythmic pattern. These cross-rhythms are woven into a truly polyrhythmic whole, composed of harmoniously blended but sharply defined elements. Translated into terms of bodily movements, one could speak of a smooth harmonious effect created by an interplay of vigorous, jerky, but never awkward, individual movements.<sup>39</sup> The rest of the poem reads:

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

Te queja todavía,  
negro bembón;  
sin pega y con harina,  
negro bembón,  
majagua de dri blanco,  
negro bembón;  
sapato de do tono,  
negro bembón...

(1:103)

(Liverlip and all  
you have it made;  
Caridá is keeping you,  
she gives you all you need.

You're still complaining,  
liverlip black man;  
no job but you have bread,  
liverlip black man,  
a white drill suit,

39. It was in reading Jahn that I was first alerted to this kind of poetry analysis (see *Muntu*, 93). However, it is a style of analysis that comes easily to me and to those African-ancestored Caribbean people with whom I have discussed the matter.

liverlip black man;  
two-tone shoes,  
liverlip black man.)

The final stanza is a replaying of the second one, which in this case assumes the role of the refrain.

The following strophe from “Mulata” (Brownskin girl), another of the original eight *son* poems, better illustrates the special blend of smoothness and vigor that creates the characteristic rhythm:

*Y fíjate bien que tú*  
*no ere tan adelantá,*  
*poqqe tu boca e bien grande,*  
*y tu pasa, colorá.*

(1:104; my italics)

(And, you better look good, you  
not too white yourself neither,  
your mouth kind of big,  
and you dye your dry-up head.)

My italics indicate the main accents in each line. In the second line there is an especially long interval of five syllables between the stresses. This upsets the balance, since the intervals in the other lines are only of two or three syllables. It is a momentary interruption of the balance, which is soon restored by the recurrence of regularity in the following lines. It is as if in the second line there were a quiver, a seeming stumble, an apparent defect in the rhythm. All of this is only apparent, however, because the necessary shifting or readjusting that it occasions is not awkward. It is a smooth jerkiness, injecting a sharply defined contrasting element that fits harmoniously into the total scheme, a vigorous, vital whole.

The initial stanza of the same poem is essentially a simple four-line, octosyllabic stanza—a very traditional form called a *redondilla de rimas abrazadas*:

Ya yo me enteré, mulata,  
mulata, ya sé que dise  
que yo tengo la narise  
como nudo de cobbata.

(1:104)

(I done hear the talk, brownskin girl,  
brownskin girl, I know how you saying  
that I have a nose  
just like a water hose.)

Irregularity and vigor are achieved by the undercurrents of rhythm set up through the repetition of sounds, while an internal rhyme scheme alters and enriches the staid regularity of the romance. The strophe could be rewritten thus:

Ya yo me enteré,  
mulata,  
mulata, ya sé  
que dise  
que yo tengo la narise  
como nudo de cobbata.

The effect of this verse is similar to that achieved by the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, in these lines from "Negus":

It is not enough  
to tinkle to work on a bicycle bell  
when hell  
crackles and burns in the fourteen-inch screen of the Jap  
of the Jap of the Japanese-constructed  
United-Fruit-Company-imported  
hard sell, tell tale tele-  
vision set, rhinocerosly knobbed, cancerously tubed.<sup>40</sup>

Brathwaite's verses reflect in their form a more obvious fidelity to what is generally perceived to be African rhythm. But Guillén's, penned some four decades earlier, evince the same intent to capture the verbal rhythms of popular African-inspired oral poetic expressions.

The combination of short and long verses seems to be one of the most important characteristics of the *son*. In the ingenuous and unscientific language of the true enthusiast, the man or woman in the street, one could describe the *son* dance song as a rhythm with a "dip," meaning the effect that causes the dancer to literally dip down, to break his rhythm with a quick, smooth movement of the body. More than a break in rhythm, it is a "hurrying-up" movement that is necessary in order to keep in step with the overall rhythm. I mentioned a similar effect with regard to the second strophe of "Mulata." This characteristic effect is achieved by the sudden short verse, the two-, three-, or four-syllable refrain contrasted with the seven-, eight-, nine-, or ten-syllable line, as this excerpt from another of the eight original *son* poems, "Sigue...", demonstrates:

40. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, 223.

Camina, caminante,  
sigue;  
camina y no te pare,  
sigue.

(1:106)

(Walk on, walker,  
go on;  
walk on and don't stop,  
go on.)

Many similar examples can be found in the other poems of *Motivos*, and in almost all the *son* poems Guillén composed during his last fifty years. Such manifestations constitute a distinguishing feature of the genre. The following lines from "Cuando yo vine a este mundo" (When I came into this world), a poem from the collection *El son entero*, reveal the same technique:

pues cuando yo vine a este mundo,  
te digo,  
¡nadie me estaba esperando!

(1:236)

(when I came into this world,  
I tell you,  
nobody was expecting me!)

In the dramatic finale of "Mi patria es dulce por fuera" (My country is nice from the outside) from the same book, the technique is effectively used:

Un marino americano,  
bien,  
en el restaurant del puerto,  
bien,  
un marino americano

(1:227)

(An American sailor,  
yes,  
in a waterfront restaurant,  
yes,  
an American sailor)

One more instance could be cited from the *son* "Se acabó" (It's all over) from *Tengo* (I have), published in the new Cuba after Guillén's own triumphant return to his native land upon the military victory of the revolutionary forces:

se acabó por siempre aquí,  
 se acabó,  
 ay, Cuba, que sí, que sí,  
 se acabó  
 el cuero de manatí  
 con que el yanqui te pegó.  
 Se acabó.

(2:165-66)

(it's all over forever here,  
 all over,  
 oh, Cuba, yes, yes indeed,  
 all over  
 the manatee-skin whip  
 the Yankees beat you with.  
 It's all over.)

Significantly this poem was first published “on the front page of the [Havana] newspaper *Hoy*” just two days after the date of composition indicated by the author (August 7, 1960). Within a fortnight the same poem appeared in a Buenos Aires newspaper with an introductory note: “On the occasion of the nationalization through involuntary expropriation of all North American companies based in Cuba, the poet Nicolás Guillén wrote a new *son* motif entitled ‘Se acabó’” (2:482). The spirit of the *son* clearly survived the metamorphosis occasioned in Guillén’s creativity by the triumph of the revolution, for it was a *son* that burst forth from the fifty-eight-year-old poet, the official poet of the new state, writing under the inspiration of the “progressive” march forward of the proletariat in its “glorious” victory over the “evil monster” of capitalism and basking in the still new fervor of Fidel’s revolutionary rhetoric and gesture. This was exactly thirty years after the composition of the first *son* poem.

□ □ □

Apart from the rhythm, the language of Guillén’s *son* poems reveals their roots in the oral literature of Afro-Cubans. Moved by his desire to be the poet of the black peoples, to “hablar en negro de verdad” (to speak in real black) (1:120) like his persona Kid Chocolate of the 1929 poem “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano” (Small ode to a black Cuban boxer), Guillén tried in the original eight compositions to depict as realistically as possible the actual speech of the personae. Although the quotations I have already cited all contain samples, the following strophe from “Hay que tené

voluntá” (Gotta keep on keeping on), perhaps more than any other, evinces all the features of the new, realistic language:

Empeña la plancha eléctrica,  
 pa podé sacá mi flú;  
 buca un reá,  
 buca un reá,  
 cómprate un paquete’ vela  
 poqque a la noche no hay lu.  
 (1:107)

(Pawn the electric iron,  
 and take out my good suit;  
 get some bread,  
 get some bread,  
 buy a pack of candles  
 because it ain’t have no light at night.)

Consonant groups are simplified through the process of assimilation, as in *elétrica* for *eléctrica*, *buca* for *busca*, and *poqque* for *porque*. The liquids in final position are lost, as in *podé* for *poder* and *reá* for *real*; the process being ultimately the same one that accounts for the loss of the final *s*, as in *lu*, for there was probably an intermediate aspiration of the final liquids. A similar process accounts for the apocope resulting in *pa* in place of *para*. *Paquete de velas* becomes *paquete’ vela* quite understandably: the loss of the intervocalic *d* is a feature of most dialects of Spanish, as is indeed the aspiration and ultimate loss of the final *s*. Finally, the slang word *flu* is introduced for *traje* (suit).

It is important here to refer again to the long and venerable tradition of *negrismo*, the use of a literary black Spanish, which goes back to the Golden Age theater of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>41</sup> This tradition is undoubtedly connected to the profound influence of African culture on all aspects of life in the Iberian peninsula, after the invasion and conquest of the peninsula by Islamic Africans in the year 711. In fact, it would be ludicrous to confine African influence to this single historical episode—even though it lasted several centuries—for between Spain and Africa

41. González Echevarría in “Guillén as Baroque” highlights the baroque as the intellectual basis for the joining of African and other exotic elements to the Euro-Hispanic mainstream. However (as I suggested in Chapter 1, note 12), the researcher must encompass the larger context and thus include the possibility of an African provenance of the essential baroque features. For another view of the matter, the reader may wish to see John M. Lipski, “The Golden Age ‘Black Spanish’: Existence and Coexistence.”

there lies only a very narrow strip of water. Although one could reasonably be skeptical about the authenticity of a black Spanish created by Góngora, Lope de Vega, or even Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, there are extant versions of songs used by Afro-Cubans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that contain samples of what has to be considered a Creole Spanish. Some of these songs are quoted in Rosa E. Valdés-Cruz's anthology of black poetry.<sup>42</sup>

By far the most interesting example of a literary black Spanish is that created by the Afro-Colombian poet Candelario Obeso (1849–1884). His most important work, *Cantos populares de mi tierra* (1877), antedates Guillén's *son* poems by approximately fifty years. As the title clearly indicates, the inspiration for these scribal poems is the popular oral literature of Obeso's African-ancestored fellow citizens. The language of these poems, as indeed every aspect of their form and content, could with profit be compared to that employed in Guillén's literary compositions. Laurence E. Prescott in his recent book on Obeso says, "In his poems Obeso sticks closely to the popular speech of his native province. He tries to capture and communicate the beauty, spontaneity, the simplicity—in a word, the spirit—inherent in the popular speech through a faithful phonetic reproduction and a re-elaboration of its folkloric and imaginative content, the very sap, so to speak, of this style of speaking."<sup>43</sup>

One of the lyrical high points of this poetry based on the realistic portrayal of the speech of the common folk is attained in the refrain of the poem "La canción der boga ausente" (The song of the home-sick boatman):

Qué trite que etá la noche,  
La noche qué trite etá;  
No hai en er Cielo un etrella ...  
Remá, remá.<sup>44</sup>

(How sad the night is,  
How sad is the night;  
There's not a star in the sky . . .  
Row, row.)

The *s* at the end of a syllable is first aspirated and then lost, as was seen in the preceding sample taken from Guillén. Thus *triste* becomes *trite* and *está, etá*. There is confusion of the liquids, the *l* of

42. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 83–85 (see pages 34–35 for samples of Góngora and Sor Juana).

43. Prescott, *Candelario Obeso*, 143.

44. *Ibid.*, 188.

*el* becoming an *r*; and of course the final *r* of *remá* is lost, probably by the same process that was indicated in the discussion of the preceding sample from Guillén.

Superbly expressive as Obeso's poetry is, and richly significant in the history of Afro-American culture, it probably did not have a direct impact on Guillén, who was more directly influenced by the linguistic posturing of the so-called Afro-Antillean school. Proponents of this school, of course, drew heavily on the tradition of literary *negrismo* with its artificial, stereotyped black speech—of which some features coincided with those employed by Obeso. One of the features most often discussed is what Alfonso Reyes, citing Mariano Brull, referred to as the *jitanjáfora*, a nonsense word of highly onomatopoeic and rhythmic effect.<sup>45</sup> These nonsense words were used by the culturally Euro-Antillean poets as a short cut to “hablar en negro de verdad,” and naturally there is an abundance of *jitanjáforas* in their works. “Canto funeral” (Funeral chant) by the Cuban Emilio Ballagas contains a good example of a less garish use of the device:

¡Cundingui,  
cundingui,  
din, din, din!

Bamo llorá  
muetto pobre,  
mañana toca mí  
pasao toca ti.

¡Cundingui,  
din, din, din!<sup>46</sup>

(Cundingui,  
cundingui,  
din, din, din!

Let we cry  
the poor man dead,  
tomorrow could be me  
day after, you.

Cundingui,  
din, din, din!)

There are clear similarities with the samples cited earlier from Obeso and Guillén. The most impressive is the process that results

45. Alfonso Reyes, *La experiencia literaria*, 190.

46. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 127.

in *llorá*, with its accented final syllable so reminiscent of Obeso's magical "Remá, remá."

Guillén's most memorable *jitanjáforas* are perhaps "Sóngoro cosongo" and "Sensemayá."<sup>47</sup> *Sóngoro cosongo* is the title of his first book after the experience in 1930, and it comes from "Si tú supiera..." (If you only knew . . .), one of the original eight *son* poems:

Sóngoro cosongo  
sogo be;  
sóngoro cosongo  
de mamey.

(1:105)

"Mamey," a succulent tropical fruit, is the only generally intelligible term in the entire stanza. Then "Sensemayá" is the title of one of the poems contained in *Sóngoro cosongo*. It has as its subtitle "Canto para matar a una culebra," and it begins with an entire verse of *jitanjáforas*:

¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!

(1:147)

Unfortunately the poet has let stand a composition, "Canto negro" (Black chant), that embodies most of the worst features of the *jitanjáfora* poem. Augier reports that the work was first published "with the title 'Yambambó (canto negro)' ['Yambambó (Black Chant)'] . . . on August 10, 1930," in the same literary supplement "Ideales de una Raza" of the newspaper *Diario de la Marina* in which the *son* poems first appeared (1:490). The most articulate line of the poem, and the substance of its intelligible content, is "El negro canta y se ajuma" (The black sings and gets drunk) (1:122). The very brief poem ends in an outpouring of what, for most Spanish speakers, are mostly nonsense words:

Acuememe serembó  
aé;  
yambó,  
aé.  
Tamba, tamba, tamba, tamba,  
tamba del negro que tamba;  
tamba del negro, caramba,

47. González Echevarría has proffered an interestingly constructive explanation of *sóngoro cosongo* in "Guillén as Baroque," 313-14.

caramba, que el negro tumba:  
 ¡yamba, yambó, yambambé!  
 (1:122-23)

The term *tumba* in this verse is cleverly used to highlight its two different meanings, one as the noun *tomb*, the other as the verb *tumble*. The juxtaposing of the terms exploits the full poetic effect of the semantic contrast: “the *tamba* [loincloth] of the black who tumbles; / the tomb of the black, *caramba* [oh dear!].” Even so, the poem is little more than a babble of empty sounds.

The unfortunate reality is that, for many students and teachers of Latin American literature, the three sets of nonsense lines cited above constitute Guillén’s most important contribution to contemporary letters. The poet himself was not very pleased with this aspect of his creativity. In fact, neither were the Afro-Cubans who, as Guillén reports in his interview with Nancy Morejón, rejected it as “una discriminación más” (one more form of discrimination).<sup>48</sup> Guillén opted not to pursue this avenue to authenticity and never again employed a systematic black Spanish in any of his poems.

It would appear that he thereby curtailed the full development of the *son* poem, for the focus on language provided by black Spanish is one of the basic tools used by many other Caribbean poets in the creation of highly developed poetic expressions. As early as 1912, Claude McKay created an English-language expression in so-called dialect poetry with his “Constab Ballads.” The Cuban scholar Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, an expert on Caribbean literature, reports that as early as the nineteenth century there began to develop a scribal literature in Haitian Creole.<sup>49</sup> In this regard Senghor claims with basic justification, although in somewhat simplistic terms: “A Paul Laurence Dunbar, a Claude McKay, a Langston Hughes, a Sterling Brown have made a thing of beauty [“une merveille de beauté”] of a Negro-American patois, of the poor jabbering of uprooted slaves.”<sup>50</sup> The great beauty of contemporary Caribbean poetic expressions, such as the work of Lorna Goodison, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Tony McNeil, or Dennis Scott, among many others, clearly rests on their using the cadences of the popular speech of the African-ancestored natives in the region.<sup>51</sup>

48. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 46.

49. My source is an unpublished paper by Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, “Pluralidad e integración en la literatura caribeña.” It is very likely that the paper was ultimately published in Cuba.

50. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 19.

51. For example, Lorna Goodison, *I Am Becoming My Mother*. Since Goodison is the newest of the poets mentioned here and hence the least likely to be known, it is appropriate to cite one of her works.

The *jitanjáfora* has been used with great sensitivity to create a highly successful poetic expression. The following lines taken from the opening of Brathwaite's "Jou'vert," a poem from the collection *Islands*, evidences the artistic possibilities of nonsense words:

*bambalula bambulai*  
*bambalula bambulai*

stretch the drum  
 tight hips will sway

stretch the back  
 tight whips will flay

*bambalula bambulai*  
*bambalula bambulai.*<sup>52</sup>

The strictly onomatopoeic utterances fully capture and recreate the particular "doo dup" beat, which most people from Trinidad and Tobago would immediately acknowledge is the basic tempo of the spontaneous musical performances known as "strike ups." This basic tempo is composed of a long beat and two short ones tapped out with feeling on any resonant surface. This is the beat that pulsates through the verses of Brathwaite's poem, sustained most especially by the *jitanjáfora* in the refrain, taking the English language to new poetic possibilities.



As a poetic genre the *son* poem appears not to have fulfilled all of its aesthetic promise. Guillén's original compositions, *Motivos de son*, are the most attractive for their primitive quality, their pristine, rigid conformity to the model. Although the *son* dance song has itself evolved considerably—this would become clear to any enthusiast who listened to the old recordings and compared them with the latest versions of what is now called salsa music—still the relationship between the oral and the scribal form has become less strict. The scribal form now includes many newer elements that it did not contain originally. However, the label, for all its accrued imprecision, is still meaningful; it still epitomizes neo-African West Indian culture.

The attenuation of the *son* as a genre can be reduced to two factors. In the first place, *son* elements are present in poems that are not called *sones*. In the second, these very *son* elements are not always present to the same degree in the poems labeled *sones*.

52. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, 267.

Guillén's "Sensemayá" is often cited as the poem in which African poetic values are most noticeably present, yet it is not called a *son*. Like his original *sones*, this poem came to the poet spontaneously, effortlessly, almost as if he had learned it by heart beforehand. It is not an attempt to reproduce the verbal rhythm of the *son* music, but it certainly is an attempt to reproduce the total spirit of a popular Cuban processional dance and song rooted in the ancient history of Africa. Jahn cites this poem in a section of his book entitled "Rumba Rhythm in Lyric Poetry." In fact, he sees Guillén's greatest contribution as the creation of the rumba poem, not the *son* poem. The difference is not crucial, for the rumba is yet another of the many popular oral poetic forms in the Caribbean. The rumba, according to Jahn, has its origin in the sacred tradition of Afro-Cubans.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it could be asserted that all popular oral literary expressions of Afro-Americans are rooted in sacred tradition.

"Sensemayá" contains all those African poetic elements enshrined in the *son* poem: the variation in length of lines, thereby making the poetic rhythm depend not on feet but on a pattern of stress versus nonstress, and the vigorous, yet smooth, rhythm produced by the creation and blending of various subrhythms. This latter effect is achieved through the repetition of sounds and by the positioning of stresses in relation to nonstresses. The use of the *jitanjáfora* has already been commented on. Finally, there is even a *montuno* form, constituted by the following strophe, for example:

Sensemayá, la culebra (the snake)  
 sensemayá,  
 Sensemayá, con sus ojos, (with its eyes,)  
 sensemayá.  
 Sensemayá, con su lengua, (with its tongue)  
 sensemayá.  
 Sensemayá, con su boca, (with its mouth)  
 sensemayá.

(1:148)

There is no reason this composition could not be labeled a *son*.

Some compositions that Guillén has called *sones* are very close to traditional Hispanic, or Euro-Hispanic, verse forms. They seem to proceed from the poet's concern to reflect the voice of the *abuelo blanco* (white grandfather) of his famous "La balada de los dos abuelos" (The ballad of the two grandfathers). The inner forces of his poetic art constantly seem to direct him to precisely this kind of synthesis. In these *sones* the octosyllabic verse predominates, and

53. Jahn, *Muntu*, 90-95, 84.

there is even one, “Tierra en la sierra y el llano” (Land in the mountains and on the plains), in which lines in the very traditional form *pie quebrado* (literally, “broken foot”) have the function of providing the “dip.” Thus Guillén has utilized the age-old Euro-Hispanic manner of breaking the rhythm:

Eres amo de mi tierra  
de los árboles y el río,  
te veré.  
Eres amo de mi vida,  
mi vida que no es de nadie,  
sino mía,  
ni siquiera de mis padres,  
sino mía.  
Te veré.

(2:120)

(You are master of my land,  
of its trees and its river,  
I will see you.  
You are master of my life,  
my life which belongs to no one  
but to me,  
not even to my parents,  
but to me.  
I will see you.)

The poem was written to celebrate the Agrarian Reform announcement of 1959 and fittingly exudes the earthy peasant flavor of the secular Euro-Hispanic romance. However, Guillén calls it a *son*.

Although “Son venezolano” (Venezuelan *son*) begins like a true *son* with a short *largo* and *montuno*, the poem is really composed of three *décimas*, each interspaced with couplets of five-syllable lines. The *décima* is, basically, a ten-line composition in the romance (or octosyllabic) meter that is deemed quintessentially Euro-Hispanic. It is interesting, however, that African-ancestored Hispanic Americans also have made this form their own. Nicomedes Santa Cruz, for example, has developed a sensitive and peculiar poetic expression on the basis of the *décima*. The Ecuadorean scholar Laura Hidalgo Alzamora presents the *décimas* from the province of Esmeraldas—a province in which the majority of the population is of African origin—as the most representative Afro-Ecuadorean poetic expression. Guillén weaves this particular *décima* into a *son* by creating an exciting pattern of rhythms and cross-rhythms through the repetition of *a-o* and *o-a* assonances as

well as consonantal rhymes in *ado*, *alta*, *ito*, and *ía*. He interlaces the *décimas* with the refrain “!Cante, Juan Bimba, / yo lo acompaño!” (Sing, Juan Bimba, / I’ll accompany you) (1:241). The last of the three *décimas* constituting this poem goes:

—Ando a pie, bebo parado,  
me buscan cuando hago falta,  
y mi cobija es tan alta  
que duermo sobre ella echado.  
Este es mi canto cerrado,  
que en vez de cantar recito;  
ahora lo digo pasito,  
porque es cosa suya y mía,  
pero así que llegue el día,  
en vez de cantar, ¡lo grito!

(1:241–42)

(I walk on my own two legs, I drink on my feet,  
I can be found when I am needed,  
and my blanket is so long  
that I stretch out on it to sleep.  
This is my very own song,  
that I do not sing but recite;  
I speak it now in a low voice,  
because it’s your business and mine,  
but when the right day comes,  
instead of singing, I’ll shout it out!)

All in all, then, notwithstanding the trend toward synthesis, the *son* survives as a clearly recognizable poetic form, essentially what it was when it first emerged in 1930.

Triggered finally by his contact with Langston Hughes, Guillén’s West Indian creativity is analogous to the North American’s. However, it is also quintessentially Afro-Hispanic, clearly belonging to the same species as the art of Candelario Obeso, for example. The *son* is one of the poetic manifestations of the Caribbean people, its solid relationship (in terms of form and content) with the *kaiso* and *vallenato* having been firmly established. The essential route from orality to scribal art that Guillén and Obeso followed, which Hughes and all the creators of the “new black poetry” also followed, is open to all Caribbean scribal bards. In fact, certain of them, like Brathwaite, McKay, Damas, Brière, Roumain, and Goodison, have evidently set out along the same road.

The analyses I have presented suggest that the relationship between *kaiso* and *son* is of a very special type, sharing elements other

than the basic African heritage: the common intervention of *negros franceses*, for example; or the similar process of gestation and birth into mainstream society; even the striking similarity (evident to the listening enthusiast) between the modern and the 1920s versions of the forms. Carpentier has linked the *son* to the *merengue* from the Dominican Republic through the common *cinquillo* and the whole matter of the *negros franceses*. Alfred Melon sees a similarity in structure between the *son* and the *biguín* or *laggbia* of his native Martinique.<sup>54</sup>

There are evidently clear links between the *son* and the Jamaican reggae, which in recent times has burst upon the larger world society, emerging mostly from Kingston's poorer sections. Like the *son*, the *merengue*, *biguín*, kaiso, and so on, reggae springs from the heart of the people, a West Indian people of African origin. Its steady, driving beat issues an imperious invitation to participation, displaying all the features of African rhythm, that basic "unité dans la diversité," that repetition without monotony. Like the kaiso, it has inspired some of Brathwaite's poems—"Wings of a Dove," for example, from *Rights of Passage*. This poem begins with the lines "Brother Man the Rasta / man, beard full of lichens / brain full of lice." The stanza that most clearly reflects the reggae beat is, to my mind, the following:

Down down  
white  
man, con  
man, brown  
man, down  
down full  
man, frown-  
ing fat  
man, that  
white black  
man that  
lives in  
the town.<sup>55</sup>

□ □ □

The article "Conversación con Langston Hughes" documents the strong impression made on Guillén by the North American poet's

54. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 227.

55. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, 42, 43.

obsession for mingling with “my people.”<sup>56</sup> The psychological need and accompanying urge appear to have been felt by the Cuban as well. In Guillén, however, the urge extended not only to African-ancestored Cubans but to all common folk. Speaking of Guillén’s visit to Venezuela in 1946, the writer Miguel Otero Silva reveals this aspect of the poet’s personality: “Just as in Havana, the ordinary man in the street would greet him with an: *Adios Nicolás!*” The opening stanza of the poem “Bares,” written in Rio de Janeiro in 1953 and anthologized in the collection *La paloma de vuelo popular* (The people’s dove), gives frank poetic expression to Guillén’s consuming desire to be among the ordinary people:<sup>57</sup>

Amo los bares y tabernas  
 junto al mar,  
 donde la gente charla y bebe  
 sólo por beber y charlar.  
 Donde Juan Nadie llega y pide  
 su trago elemental,  
 y están Juan Bronco y Juan Navaja  
 y Juan Narices y hasta Juan  
 Simple, el sólo, el simplemente  
 Juan.

(2:28)

(I love those bars and taverns  
 near the sea,  
 where common folk chat and drink  
 just to chat and drink.  
 When John Nobody comes and orders  
 his basic drink,  
 and also John Hoarsevoice and John Razor  
 and John Nostrils and even John  
 Plain-and-Simple, just that, simply  
 John.)

As Derek Walcott once told me (with his own special style as the oracle casually dispensing gems of wisdom), “the poet cannot lie.” Only a sentiment deeply felt could have given birth to the beauty of the lines quoted above. Ultimately, poetry, even that of a Poeta Nacional, is not a manifesto or a declaration of party policy, it is the outpouring of genuine emotion.

56. Guillén, *Prosa de prisa*, 1:19

57. Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 251. *La paloma de vuelo popular* is itself a significant title, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

The thrust of this commitment to the people displayed by Guillén coincides with what characterizes African poetry, in the analysis of Jahn:

In African poetry, on the other hand, the expression is always in the service of the content; . . . for African poetry exists as *function*. Nor is the African poet ever concerned with his inner nature, with *his* individuality. . . . "For in the last analysis every artistic manifestation is collective, created for all and shared by all," writes Senghor. . . . The European poet is an individual and expresses what *he* feels, thinks, has experienced, and wants. The African poet is a person, and that means sorcerer, prophet, teacher. He expresses *what must be*. His "I" is not therefore "collective" in the European sense; it is not non-individual. He speaks *to* the community and *for* them. He has a social task which raises him above the community: the most important poets, Césaire, Senghor, Rabémananjara, Guillén, Ortiz and many others are politicians who exercise an official function. Their functional character does not prevent them from saying "I," but this "I" is always a "we," and every I-statement includes a binding imperative.<sup>58</sup>

Essentially Jahn is trying to account for the commitment to the people in Guillén and other neo-African poets, and he faces the serious theoretical challenge of distinguishing this from mere political pamphleteering and posturing.

The phenomenon is, I think, best explained through the incontestable merging of the poetic function with profound sympathy for the common man, the man in the streets and in bars, the oppressed and huddled masses. Contrary to Jahn's implication, if not his assertion, this approach to poetry is not exclusively African. (It is not commonly found in the post-medieval, bourgeois, capitalist societies of Western Europe, but this may be merely a matter of historical conditioning.) Cintio Vitier, a Cuban scholar and poet, speaks of "the anonymous and popular 'I' that Martí attains in his later verses," citing the example of the famous line "Yo soy un hombre sincero" (I am a sincere man) that opens the "Versos sencillos," which have become the lyrics of the hauntingly beautiful, popular Cuban song "Guantanamera."<sup>59</sup> Vitier calls this an American "I," of the same stripe as the Argentine poet José Hernández's equally famous "Aquí me pongo a cantar" (Here I stand, ready to sing)—the signature line of the protagonist in the nineteenth-century classic *Martín Fierro*.<sup>60</sup>

Peculiarly African, peculiarly American, or peculiarly human, the popular thrust is central to Guillén's creativity, as it is central to

58. Jahn, *Muntu*, 148-49.

59. Cintio Vitier, *Lo cubano en la poesía*, 253.

60. See, for example, José Hernández, *Martín Fierro*, 45.

the poetic art of many African and neo-African writers. Indeed it is related structurally to the distinctive cultures and civilizations developed by Africans. Furthermore, if, as is the case, the majority of the population in the Caribbean is of African origin, the regional culture will necessarily share many traits with African cultures. It can reasonably be argued, then, that this popular thrust in art, the wedding of beauty to function, is one of those basic features that bind Caribbean culture to those of the "home" continent.

Jahn's focusing on the political vocation in such poets as Césaire and Guillén may, then, be well conceived. Guillén's art has always been inextricably bound to political considerations, in the fullest sense of the term. The marriage of his art and politics attained its highest point with the publication of "West Indies, Ltd" in 1934—and the significance of the title should not pass unnoticed. The culmination of this life of politics and poetry was, of course, his elevation to the position of Poeta Nacional in contemporary Cuba. As early as 1937, Guillén declared in an interview in Mexico, "The poet can make revolution, but at the same time he *ought* to make poetry, that is, create art," and he lived faithfully by this principle.<sup>61</sup>

In terms of its essential structure and language, then, poetry is the same kind of phenomenon for Guillén as it is for the ordinary woman and man of the Caribbean. Also, in terms of its very function, poetry is for Guillén exactly what it is for the culture of the region. His most important book is *El son entero*. *The Complete Son* would be exactly analogous to *The Complete Kaiso* for a Trinidadian poet or *The Complete Reggae* for a Jamaican. The term *sonero* is exactly analogous to *kaisonian* or *rumbero*, a creator and singer of rumbas, or indeed the more recent and trendy expression *salsero*, a creator and singer of salsa music. In contemporary Cuba, Nicolás Guillén is not only the Poeta Nacional, he is the *sonero*—creator and singer of *sones*—par excellence.

61. Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 183.



## The Smartman

Scholars in the Thomistic philosophical tradition, stern ascetics, have been known to indulge in the playful sententiousness of defining the human being as the “animal risibile” (the laughing animal). Scholarly humor apart, I would contend that the definition is a valid one. Neither angels nor animals indulge in laughter; it is a peculiarly human or anthropomorphic activity. The African and neo-African cultures studied by anthropologists have evinced a similar approach to the definition of the human animal. Janheinz Jahn’s vision and analysis of this matter, based on his study of Bantu philosophy, are still meaningful. He asserts, on the authority of the African sages he consulted, that “‘Man’ has not only the power of the word, but also the power of laughter. Laughter is a special kind of flowing; in neo-African poetry it is repeatedly associated with a river.”<sup>1</sup>

Man stands at the crossroads of the cosmos. As the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal put it with succinct power, he is “un rien entre deux infinis” (a nothing between two infinities). He is a being in fundamental contradiction: half-animal and half-angel, some would posit, an impossible and unworkable combination; or a rational animal, others would assert, a miraculous, harmonious blend of two opposed principles, spirit and matter.

In the West African philosophical systems that have persisted and flourished in America, Esu-Elegbara is the *loa*, or god, who best symbolizes the human condition. He is the guardian of the crossroads, the mediator, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out with pen-

1. Jahn, *Muntu*, 139.

etrating insight.<sup>2</sup> He is the portal through which man must pass in order to experience the supernatural; thus he is the first *loa* to be greeted and summoned forth in all the ceremonies. He is “the lame old man on a crutch,” according to the telling description of the poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite. The same poet incorporated the authentic Haitian salutation into his own verse, at the end of the poem “Negus”:

*Att*  
*Att*  
*Attibon*

*Attibon Legba*  
*Attibon Legba*  
*Ouvri bayi pou' moi*  
*Ouvri bayi pou' moi...<sup>3</sup>*

Gates correctly reasons that Esu-Elegbara, “Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of the *loa* of *Vaudou* in Haiti, and Papa LaBas in the *loa* of Hoodoo in the United States,” is the symbol of literariness par excellence. “Esu’s functional equivalent in Afro-American profane discourse is the Signifying Monkey.”<sup>4</sup>

Literature or, indeed, all art (like laughter) is a peculiarly human activity, the product of beings caught between the two opposing principles of spirit and matter.<sup>5</sup> African and neo-African philosophies make this connection and embody it in the symbolism of Esu, the messenger, the mediator, the bridge, the one who connects the opposite poles of the inherent, irreconcilable, primordial contradiction of the human condition. His response is literature *and* laughter, for “These trickster figures, aspects of Esu, are primarily *mediators*: as tricksters they are mediators and their mediations are tricks.”<sup>6</sup> Laughter and literature are two sides of the same coin. Contemporary philosophers (like the existentialist Albert Camus) glimpsed this powerful truth, that literature is the saying of the undecipherable, the mysterious and enigmatic, while laughter is really only an acknowledgment of the absurd, the irreconcilable

2. Gates, *Black Literature*, 287.

3. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, 174, 224.

4. Gates, *Black Literature*, 286, 287.

5. If Ishmael Reed, the author of *Mumbo Jumbo*, had reflected more deeply on this idea, he perhaps would have been less disturbed by what he sees as the failure of the Bible, the basic Christian text, to portray a laughing Jesus Christ. For Christ’s humanity, it may be argued, is clearly established even without a demonstration of his ability to laugh.

6. Gates, *Black Literature*, 286.

contradiction. So Esu, as Gates sees so clearly, is the picaro, trickster, "signifying monkey," one who utters enigmatic statements, who provokes laughter, the inveterate joker, the "smartman."

Roger D. Abrahams demonstrates, as well as any other scholar, a thorough understanding of the quintessential role of the trickster or smartman in Caribbean culture. He sees the joker figure as the inveterate player, the ruler of the crossroads. Abrahams, as far as I can judge, does not make any explicit connection between this joker and Esu. However, he does come close when he reports that Nansi, a trickster figure in Caribbean folklore, is a "*bruck-up*," a stutterer, an "in-between" character. These physical characteristics are analogous to those of Legba, the "lame old man on a crutch," his limping or crippled state being, as Gates lucidly indicates, a symbol of indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup> The connection must be made, especially when the question of the crossroads is taken into consideration. Abrahams's joker, like Legba, is the lord of the crossroads, dominating the forces of chaos, creativity, and conflict. He is the reverser of order and of household values.

However, the controlled ritual release of Legba's forces in wakes, carnival, joking, and all forms of "playing" acts out for the community the basic drama of the human condition, that is, the contradiction, the constant menace of absurdity—to use the language of existentialism. This acting out helps the community deal with death and other scandalous demonstrations of fundamental contradiction. Abrahams declares:

But in the actual operations of the group, nonsense provides the major motive for a number of important ceremonial entertainments such as wakes. In wakes, license for making nonsense is given so that the social confusion of death may be articulated, brought playfully into the open, played out. Licentious play brings the group together and allows it to rehearse confusion and embarrassment in a context that is under control. On such occasions nonsense is a community focus in channeling creative energies in socially useful directions.<sup>8</sup>

Joking, or nonsense, is an important philosophical activity. True art would be impossible without it; therefore literature would be impossible without it. Abrahams's empirically based research confirms the more theoretical assessments of Jahn, his fellow anthropologist and outside observer of African and neo-African cultures. It is important to note that the theses of both scholars are consistent with reality as seen by members of the culture group. The joker or

7. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words*, 164, 170. Gates, *Black Literature*, 286.

8. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words*, 81.

smartman is highly regarded in Caribbean culture. In Saint Vincent, Abrahams argues, "friendship among the Vincentians is a joking relationship."<sup>9</sup> I have observed in my native land, Trinidad and Tobago, that joking, "giving fatigue" or *picong*, forms the basis of many, if not most, relationships between men.

This aspect of culture in Trinidad and Tobago is a fundamental source of scandal for V. S. Naipaul, a truly brilliant and insightful commentator on the society of his native Trinidad and Tobago but a man blinded by frequent bouts of confusing emotionalism. He rightly sees the importance of trickery or, as he calls it in his impeccably elegant English, picaroon behavior. However, he misunderstands its origin and misinterprets its significance. In *The Middle Passage*, he presents the case of a notorious smartman, Valmond "Fatman" Jones, who with great fanfare promoted a visit to the island and a concert by the famed Afro-American recording artist, the late Sam Cooke. However, Mr. Jones "flew unexpectedly to Martinique . . . 36 hours before his singing idol was booked to perform before a sell-out crowd at the Globe Cinema, Port-of-Spain." The visit and the concert did not materialize, of course, and the ticket holders were not reimbursed. Naipaul's commentary on the incident begins:

Three youths were talking about this affair one afternoon around a coconut-cart near the Savannah.

The Indian said, "I don't see how anybody could vex with the man. *That* is brains."

"Is what my aunt say," one of the Negro boys said. "She ain't feel she get rob. She feel she pay two dollars for the *intelligence*."

Naipaul's basic instinct guides him through his habitual cloud of bias, and he dimly intuits the validity of the picaroon society: "To condemn the picaroon society out of hand is to ignore its important quality. And this is not its ability to beguile and enchant. For if such a society breeds cynicism, it also breeds tolerance, not the tolerance between castes and creeds and so on—which does not exist in Trinidad anyway—but something more profound: tolerance for every human activity and affection for every demonstration of wit and style."<sup>10</sup> Naipaul was not far from the heart of the matter. One could reasonably conjecture that he himself shared some of the admiration expressed in the statement "*That* is brains."

The Caribbean is awash with smartmen. Their presence there is related to profound cultural values. The more extreme cases of the "Fatman" type are as much a part of the system as the daily and

9. *Ibid.*, 95.

10. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 81, 82.

more benevolent manifestations discussed by Abrahams. Even when his antics are unequivocally criminal, the smartman induces laughter, and laughter is therapeutic, even in the case of “Fatman” Jones: “I don’t see how anybody could vex with the man.” Indeed, the “Fatman” style of picaroon behavior derives, in essence, from the therapeutic trickery practiced by slaves. Potentially, tricks can achieve two important effects: in some cases, a mitigation of absurdity on the immediate, material plane and, in every case, relief on the psychological plane. In both cases laughter is involved.



Nicolás Guillén understood the basic importance of laughter and, either consciously or unconsciously, structured his art on theoretical underpinnings consistent with those I have just outlined. The figure of the smartman stands as the most apt symbol for the practitioner of *choteo*, or in Trinidadian parlance the *picong*, the irony and humor that are fundamental in Guillén’s poetry. If, as I argue, this ironic humor is of African origin, then it could be considered to be thoroughly Caribbean.

*Sóngoro cosongo*, the book that in 1931 cemented Guillén’s newfound and definitive artistic orientation, begins with a poetic affirmation significantly entitled “Llegada” (Arrival). The book, as its provocative subtitle declares, presents the poet’s new “Poemas mulatos” (Mulatto poems)—poems with a “color cubano” (Cuban color) that fully represent the spirit of his nation’s authentic culture. “El espíritu de Cuba es mestizo” (Cuba’s spirit is a hybrid), he declares in his introduction to the book.<sup>11</sup> The true Cuban culture is a mix, a cocktail, fashioned of two basic ingredients of equal importance and validity, one African, the other European.

The poem “Llegada,” like the entire book, constitutes one of Guillén’s more artistically complete affirmations of the African heritage. It begins poignantly:

¡Aquí estamos!  
La palabra nos viene húmeda de los bosques,  
y un sol energético nos amanece entre las venas.  
El puño es fuerte  
y tiene el remo.

(1:115)

(Here we are!  
The word comes to us damp from the woods,  
and an energetic sun rises up in our veins.

11. Quoted in Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 110.

Our fist is strong,  
it holds the oar.)

These free verses are redolent of a vigorous musicality, an energetic and earthy rhythm, that bespeaks the somewhat stereotypical exotic vision of Africa that Guillén subscribed to in those early, heady days. According to this conception, the black man is not only an eminently physical being, he is also eminently natural. He is, in the words of Aimé Césaire, “truly the elder son of the world” or, in the words of Langston Hughes, he “speaks of rivers.”<sup>12</sup> The new Negro, obviously still tainted with nativism and still exuding the dank smell of the jungle, has indeed arrived, the poem proclaims, to enjoy the full benefits of his rich cultural legacy.

Thus “¡Aquí estamos!” echoes throughout the poem, and the poem ends with an announcement of the final victory, a strong poetic declaration that “we shall overcome,” that “we are somebody.” This announcement proclaims the deep underlying significance of laughter in African and neo-African cultures: “Nuestra risa madrugará sobre los ríos y los pájaros” (Our laughter will rise before dawn over the rivers and the birds) (1:116). The trope constituted by the “amanece” (dawns) of the first stanza is thus repeated and completed in the “madrugará” (will rise before dawn) here. The closed circuit of the poem’s symbolism identifies the energetic sun within the new negro’s veins with his power of laughter. His laughter and the energetic sun flowing in his veins are potent forces of dawn and early morning, forces of regeneration and liberation. The future tense in the final line speaks not of mere future possibilities but of the poet’s special powers as maker of word magic, as prophet whose word power can convert prophetic utterance to fascinating fiat.<sup>13</sup> Frantz Fanon, a famous West Indian intellectual from the island of Martinique, used the same trope in his vision of the final victory. He saw the process of awakening and commitment to struggle of a native artist or intellectual as a three-phase process, and he described the second phase of this process as one in which “We spew ourselves up; but already underneath laughter can be heard.”<sup>14</sup>

Guillén’s poem “Cuando yo vine a este mundo,” from the collection *El son entero*, elucidates the importance the poet attaches to laughter. The third strophe reads:

12. Césaire, *Cabier d’un retour*, 118. Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 4.

13. The reader is referred to the discussion presented in the closing pages of Chapter 2, which is based on Jahn’s analysis of the poetic function in African cultures; see also *Muntu*, 148–49.

14. Fanon, *The Wretched*, 179.

Otros lloran, yo me río,  
 porque la risa es salud:  
 lanza de mi poderío,  
 coraza de mi virtud.  
 Otros lloran, yo me río,  
 porque la risa es salud.  
 (1:235)

(Others weep, I laugh,  
 because laughter is health:  
 the lance of my power,  
 the breastplate of my virtue.  
 Others weep, I laugh,  
 because laughter is health.)

The catchy *son* rhythm encodes a philosophical statement of a characteristically homespun, popular variety. For example, in the sixth strophe the persona declares ingenuously:

Hay gentes que no me quieren,  
 porque muy humilde soy;  
 ya verán como se mueren  
 y que hasta a su entierro voy,  
 con eso y que no me quieren  
 porque muy humilde soy.  
 (1:236)

(There are people who don't like me  
 because I'm just one of the poor folk;  
 but they'll see how they will die  
 and I'll be the one at their funeral,  
 with all this business about not liking me  
 because I'm just one of the poor folk.)

So, in this poem, the assertion of the importance of laughter coincides with a deeply rooted cultural value. Again, Jahn provides the most useful analysis of this aspect of neo-African and African civilizations. The passage is lengthy but illuminating:

And laughter itself, this special *Kuntu* force, is closely related to the word, to Nommo, for "man" has not only the power of the word, but also the power of laughter. . . . Laughter is a special word, it liberates and throws off one's bonds, it is unbound like a river. "A river rises in the heights," writes the Ecuadorian Adalberto Ortiz in his novel *Juyungo*, "and goes into the depths. It carries gold and silver and mud and glass, always different, never tiring, full of goodness. It is a prolonged Negro laugh on the dark face of the forest." And the Cuban Nicolás Guillén writes: "To

you, tropics, I owe that childlike enthusiasm of running, laughing over mountains and clouds, while an ocean of sky is shattered in innumerable star-waves at my feet!" And his countryman Marcelino Arozarena sings: "Laughs, river, not of water, river of teeth, not a boat road, but warm laughter seasoned with peppers and water teeth, as we do it at home, as my wit is seasoned with the salt of your tears." Laughter becomes Nommo, the power word itself, in the verse of the North American poet Paul Vesey: "and my raining laughter beats down the fury . . ." And in the revolutionary verses of Césaire: "Yes, friends, your untamed laughter, your lizard laughter in their walls, your heretics' laughter in their dogmas, your incorrigible laughter, your whirlpool laughter, into which their cities fall spellbound, your time bomb laughter under their lordly feet, your laughter will conquer them! Laugh, laugh, till the world, conquered by your laughter, falls at your naked feet!"<sup>15</sup>

Jahn's list could well be continued with reference to Quince Duncan, one of the better known contemporary Costa Rican novelists. Born in the province of Limón, he is of Anglophone Caribbean ancestry. Laughter erupts in his novels as a manifestation of hope and triumph over adversity. *Los cuatro espejos* (The four mirrors) ends with the sentence "Una sonrisa profunda iluminó el color de mi piel" (A profound smile lit up the color of my skin). This is a novel about the crisis of a black man married into a bourgeois white family, who wakes up one morning to find that he cannot see the reflection of his face in the mirror. Duncan's later novel *La paz del pueblo* (The peace of the people) ends with an enigmatic "carcajada de mujer que venía del río" (woman's guffaw coming from the river). This guffaw, Duncan explained in an interview, is neither the diabolical snarl of a despairing romantic nor the mindless jabbering of a buffoon, but rather an earthy and characteristically black expression of hope.<sup>16</sup>



The *sonero* Guillén's pervasive humor is based on the African heritage, and to be fully appreciated it must be seen as intrinsically linked to these other Caribbean cultural expressions. This humor is an important device used by *soneros*, kaisonians, picaroons (described by Naipaul), broad talkers, and all members of the popular culture. Generally subtle and piquant, it can be bitter at times, a mocking humor that to the outsider may appear extreme in its self-deprecation. Sometimes it may appear an almost universal reductio

15. Jahn, *Muntu*, 139-40.

16. Quince Duncan, *Los cuatro espejos*, 163. Quince Duncan, *La paz del pueblo*, 187. Ian I. Smart, "The Literary World of Quince Duncan: An Interview," 288-89.

ad absurdum. According to the Cuban writer Jorge Mañach, there is in the popular culture of his people a pervasive kind of joking called *choteo*, which exposes human foibles and absurdities in an intricate, imaginative way that he views as negative and ultimately anarchic.<sup>17</sup> He deems it a Creole practice, which in the Cuban context automatically suggests neo-Africanness. In spite of Mañach's reservations, *choteo* must be linked culturally to *picong* and other characteristic manifestations of humor in the region; in which case the laughter, far from being negative, would be warm, rich, and touched with love. This is the style of humor Guillén used in the *son* poem.

Guillén recounts that the famous line of his first *son* poem came to him in the almost trancelike state just before sleep "when a voice, coming out of nowhere it seemed, spoke into my ear clearly and precisely these two words: *negro-bembón*." He recalls that he got up out of bed and "began to write. As if I were remembering something I had once learned."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, my analysis suggests that the poet was quite accurate in his perception that the words of his poem sprang from the collective memory, for they can be viewed as the expression of a master of *picong* or *choteo* "giving fatigue" or signifying on one of his brothers. The *sonero* begins:

¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,  
cuando te disen negro bembón,  
si tiene la boca santa,  
negro bembón?

(1:103)

(Why do you get so vexed  
when they call you liverlip,  
if you mouth is really so nice,  
liverlip black man?)

Abrahams makes an important distinction between talking broad, using the informal registers, the more Creole versions of the language, and talking sweet, using the formal registers, the more standard versions. According to his "objective," "scientific," and somewhat artificial interpretation, the man-of-words must be skilled in both forms of expression but keeps each one in its place. In creating the poem "Negro bembón," however, Guillén used broad talk in a context that normally allowed only sweet talk, that is, in scribal poetry. The black community was scandalized by Guillén's daring and accused him of complicity in the perpetuation of the racial

17. Jorge Mañach, *Indagación del choteo*.

18. Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, 85.

discrimination that was then firmly in force. Of course, there already had existed for many years the stylized black Spanish created by mainstream Euro-Hispanic writers, and although the black community had no control over this form of victimization and implicit racism, Guillén's black readers felt that one of their own should have been more respectful of the cultural codes. Nowadays, the approach that was deemed unacceptably revolutionary in 1930 is a commonplace poetic device practiced with great skill by all of the major Caribbean poets, a device that is indeed necessary for the creation of an authentic Caribbean poetic language.

The fact that Guillén resorted to broad talk here, however, indicates his intention of acting out the role of the "sporty fellow," the "shit-talker," the joker confronting the absurd. This role has been clearly defined and understood by the popular culture of the African-ancestored Caribbean. It is the role of the trickster, the signifying monkey, the smartman, all of them aspects of the central Legba figure, the symbol of indeterminacy, the sign of literariness. I use the term *smartman* as it is, to my mind, the most expressive of those describing the symbol-of-literariness.

The very activity of the smartman has also been described by a plethora of terms, which is an indication of its cultural significance. One term dear to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is *mamaguy*. Indeed, many natives of the two-island state comfortably assume they have exclusive rights to the term. However, Rito Llerena Villalobos in his study of the *vallenato* presents *mamagallismo* as a distinctive feature of the culture of Colombians of the Caribbean coastal region. Abrahams's definition of *signifying* is cited verbatim by Gates:

Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any of a number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake saying, "My brother needs a piece of cake."<sup>19</sup>

This definition is perfectly appropriate for *mamaguy*, as natives of Trinidad and Tobago use the term, and also for the *mamagallar* of

19. Gates, *Black Literature*, 288.

the Colombians, whose *vallenato* is their most characteristic oral poetic expression.

Guillén clearly has a larger social good in mind when he *mama-guys* the *negro bembón*. The central thesis of the poem is articulated in the lines “Bembón así como ere / tiene de to” (Liverlip and all / you got it made) (1:103). In spite of his big negroid lips, the *negro bembón* is not doing too badly by the standards of the time and the particular socioeconomic milieu. These standards, which most African-ancestored inhabitants of the Americas would find unacceptable today, rest entirely on the unethical and small-minded materialism of a local pimp: he is being kept by his woman, Caridá, and although he is unemployed, he is flush with cash and resplendent in trendy two-tone shoes and a white drill suit. Alfred Melon, commenting on Guillén’s use of humor, affirms, “His social concern translates into the painting of portraits animated by the black presence, which though basically humorous are not any less transcendent.”<sup>20</sup> By inspiring the black man to acknowledge and laugh at the ridiculous black self-image, an image created by centuries of white racism, Guillén can start disarming the myth and will ultimately destroy the cancerous, utterly false, genocidal assumptions. Here, he is putting into practice the principle enunciated in his line “porque la risa es salud.”

Guillén’s imagery is profoundly Cuban and Caribbean. The term *bembón* itself comes directly from popular culture, for example. It must have been used many times in the sayings and oral poems of the poet’s familiar Afro-Cuban community. One example is available to us today in the form of a catchy salsa song recorded by the Puerto Rican group “Cortijo y su combo.” The song, “El negrito bembón” (Thick-lipped darkie), is cited by Isabelo Zenón Cruz, a Puerto Rican scholar of African origin, in his study of the black presence in his country’s culture. It tells of the murder of a *negrito bembón* who was much loved by everyone. The police arrived to investigate the crime and arrest the murderer. One of the policemen, “que también era bembón” (who was also *bembón*), had the misfortune of being the one to make the necessary inquiries. The song ends:

Y sabe la pregunta que le hizo al matón  
¿Por qué lo mató, de usted la razón?

Y sabe la respuesta que le dió el matón  
yo lo maté porque era bembón.  
El guardia escondió la bemba y le dijo:  
Esa no es razón para matarlo

20. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 210.

Esa no es razón para matar al negrito bembón.<sup>21</sup>

(And do you know what he asked the murderer  
Why did you kill him, tell me why?

And do you know what the murderer replied  
I killed him because he was *bembón*.  
The policeman hid his own thick lips and said:  
That is no reason to kill the man  
That is no reason to kill the *negrito bembón*.)

Zenón Cruz sees this song as another manifestation of the self-destructive imagery developed by African Puerto Ricans. However, below the surface self-disparagement, there is a subtle, but real, repudiation of the old shame and scorn, even bitter hatred, of blackness. The way the policeman's ludicrous shame of his *bemba* is exposed to the light of day most certainly implies condemnation of his attitude. Most of the humor derives from the absurdity of the situation—the policeman is cowed by the sneer of a debased criminal who is completely in the policeman's power. Laughter such as this is certainly therapeutic, and what at first sight appeared to be self-mockery on the part of neo-Africans turns out to be an intense and subtly expressed vehicle of solace.

The same cultural reflex that set off Guillén's *mamaguying* of the *negro bembón* obviously generated the popular song by Cortijo and his group. Gerardo Maloney, born in 1945, a new Panamanian poet of Anglophone Caribbean ancestry, displays the same reflex in his poem "Arturo King" from his first collection, *Juega vivo* (Get smart) (1984). When Maloney begins his poem with the lines "Arturo King / took quite seriously / his surname if not his given name," he creates in the reader or listener the expectation of hearing some engagingly humorous anecdote at the expense of "the King." The work is indeed saturated with irony, at the expense of Arturo and his human frailty; but Arturo's frailty occasions a transcendental dethronement that represents the experience of all oppressed and dispossessed people. Arturo begins the enterprise of life with a heady enthusiasm that is reflected in his wardrobe (like that of the *negro bembón*) and in his bearing:

He enthusiastically acquired  
various pairs of elevated shoes,  
three new pairs of pants,  
colored shirts,

21. Isabelo Zenón Cruz, *Narciso describe su trasero: El negro en la cultura puertorriqueña*, 2:100.

creams and perfumes  
with the scent of flowers.  
A beaming face  
and a strut that was  
cool and fine.

The poem ends devastatingly:

With his illusions shattered  
and his reality reduced to a  
day-to-day struggle,  
he lives now far removed from the throne.

Harsh as it is, Maloney's humor is not ultimately negative. Above all, it works on the same principles as those informing African and Afro-American poetry throughout their secular existence.<sup>22</sup> The laughter evoked by Maloney (as in both Guillén's and Cortijo's cases of the *negro bembón*) springs from love, and it is ultimately salutary.

Laughter of this kind rings through the eight poems that constitute Guillén's *Motivos de son*. "Tú no sabe inglés" (You don't know no English), for example, tells the story of Victor Manuel—Bito Manué—a poor, simple brother from the barrio who, with his most elementary knowledge of English, launches himself into the perils, both linguistic and psychological, of a relationship with a white Yankee tourist—"la mericana." The poet mercilessly, or so it seems, exposes the ridiculousness of poor Victor's situation. Victor's total English vocabulary consists of the baseball expression *strike one* and the individual numbers *one, two, three*, all pronounced with a strong Cuban accent:

La mericana te buca,  
y tú le tiene que huí:  
tu inglés era de etrái guan,  
de etrái guan y guan tu tri.

(1:109)

(The American chick is looking for you  
and you have to run:  
all the English you know is *etrái guan*,  
*etrái guan* and *guan tu tri*.)

Naturally, Victor runs into trouble and makes a proper fool of himself. The poet gives him these parting words of advice:

22. This passage has been taken essentially from my "Popular Black Intellectualism," 46. The text of the poem can be found in Gerardo Maloney, *Juega vivo*, 33.

No te enamore má nunca,  
 Bito Manué,  
 si no sabe inglés,  
 si no sabe inglés.

(1:110)

(Don't fall in love ever again,  
 Victor Manuel,  
 unless you know some English,  
 unless you know some English.)

Langston Hughes was particularly impressed with the humor of this poem, and with good reason, for it is a clear example of signifying, the same kind of signifying that he engaged in himself. Undoubtedly, Victor will go through life bearing the sign of this act of foolhardiness, accepting it with his own laughter, which will respond to the certain laughter of the community.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps he already has the nickname "Manué bembón." From now on, however, he will surely be called something like "Mr. Etrái Guan," and this additional moniker will outlast both his and the community's recollection of its origin.

*Motivos de son* suffers from a heavy dose of what is charitably called *pintoresquismo* (picturesqueness), and Guillén realized this, as did the Afro-Cuban community. True as always to the exigencies of his artistic vocation, the poet took heed of criticism. Indeed, his response was counterproductive, vitiating some of the creative potential that authentic popular speech now provides Caribbean writers. Significantly, however, while the broad talk is eliminated from his later verses, the *picong* itself remains.

□ □ □

In many respects, the poem "West Indies, Ltd" is one of Guillén's most fundamental works, signaling his definitive commitment to his country's struggle for liberation. The poem ends:

LAPIDA

*Esto fue escrito por Nicolás Guillén, antillano,  
 en el año de mil novecientos treinta y cuatro.*

(1:170)

(INSCRIPTION)

*This was written by Nicolás Guillén, a West Indian,  
 in the year nineteen hundred and thirty four.)*

Its subject matter is West Indian; it is the work of a West Indian who

23. I analyzed this poem in my "Nicolás Guillén's *Son* Poem: An African Contribution to Contemporary Caribbean Poetics," 361.

is looking at his world in a way that can only be characterized as West Indian. An element running through the entire poem is its humor, an ironic humor, gentle at times, at times bitter, a humor that aims its barbs at West Indians, an absurd and laughable people, an “oscuro pueblo sonriente” (dark smiling people):

Bajo el relampagueante traje de dril  
andamos todavía con taparrabos;  
(1:158-59)

(Under the flashy drill suit  
we still wear a loincloth.)

The most important aspect of this and of all the barbs he aims at the West Indies is his persistent, ardent identification with the people, manifested principally through the use of the first-person plural.

In this land of oddities and absurdities, there is a need to be essentially incongruous:

¿Qué nos puede faltar?  
Y aun lo que nos faltare lo mandaríamos buscar.  
¡West Indies! Nueces de coco, tabaco y aguardiente.  
Este es un oscuro pueblo sonriente.  
(1:159)

(What more do we need?  
And even if we didn't have it we'd send for it.  
West Indies! Coconuts, tobacco, and rum.  
These are dark smiling people.)

The question “What more do we need?” posed at the end of a verse outlining some of the endemic absurdities of West Indian society is particularly loaded. West Indians, repeatedly referred to as “dark smiling people,” provoke the poet's scornful laughter, expressed in rhymed but irregularly syllabled lines that constitute the first part of the poem and that lead into the climax:

Me río de ti, noble de las Antillas,  
mono que andas saltando de mata en mata,  
payaso que sudas por no meter la pata,  
y siempre la metes hasta las rodillas.  
Me río de ti, blanco de verdes venas  
—¡bien se te ven aunque ocultarlas procuras!—,  
me río de ti porque hablas de aristocracias puras,  
de ingenios florecientes y arcas llenas.  
¡Me río de ti, negro imitamicos,  
que abres los ojos ante el auto de los ricos,

y que te avergüenzas de mirarte el pellejo oscuro,  
 cuando tienes el puño tan duro!  
 Me río de todos: del policía y del borracho,  
 del padre y de su muchacho,  
 del presidente y del bombero.  
 Me río de todos: me río del mundo entero.  
 Del mundo entero que se emociona frente a cuatro peludos,  
 erguidos muy orondos detrás de sus chillones escudos,  
 como cuatro salvajes al pie de un cocotero.

(1:160)

(I laugh at you, nobleman of the West Indies,  
 a mere monkey leaping from branch to branch,  
 a clown, you fight hard not to put your foot in your mouth,  
 but you always do, all the way up to your knees.  
 I laugh at you, white man with green veins  
 —ah, everyone sees you for what you are, try as you might to hide!—  
 I laugh at you, you speak of aristocratic purity,  
 of flourishing sugar mills, and of full coffers.  
 I laugh at you, black mimic man,  
 you gaze wide-eyed at the rich man's car,  
 and you're ashamed of your own black hide,  
 when you have such a strong fist!  
 I laugh at you all: policemen and drunks,  
 fathers and sons,  
 presidents and firemen.  
 I laugh at you all: I laugh at the entire bunch.  
 The whole bunch of you oohing and aahing before four hairy men  
 erect, overly puffed up behind their garish coats of arms,  
 like four savages at the foot of a coconut tree.)

Most West Indians feel an instinctive identification with this presentation, not only because of the appropriateness of the images and the emotions they evoke, but also because the tone rings true, as one that they themselves have probably often used. In fact, the “policía” of these lines is a duplicate of the policeman in “Negrito bembón,” for he too was ashamed of his black hide, of his *bemba*, when he so clearly had not only a strong fist but also a nightstick and a choke hold, at least, if not a revolver or an automatic rifle (or any of the other instruments of aggression available to the long arm of the law). Policemen are again the butt of Guillén’s *mamaguying* in the poem “Policía,” which I will analyze later in this chapter.

Aimé Césaire, in his famous foundation document of *Négritude*, castigates with even greater vehemence the West Indies that he knows and indeed loves: “At the end of the dawn, flowered with

frail creeks, the hungry West Indies, pitted with smallpox, dynamited with alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dirt of this city sinisterly stranded." This is the second strophe or paragraph of his famed *Cabier*. In the French classical tradition, Césaire begins his work by situating the action (in the West Indies, in this case). He situates his native land not just materially but spiritually, and to do so he opts for a list of viciously insightful barbs introduced by the phrase "At the end of the dawn." They appear to rival each other in intensity: "At the end of the dawn, this inert city, with its lepers, consumption, famines, fears hidden in ravines, fears perched in trees, fears sunk in the soil, fears drifting in the sky, accumulations of fears with their fumeroles of anguish. . . ." <sup>24</sup> There is little laughter here, neither the explicit "me río de ti" nor the implicit. These passages describe the bitter, merciless vision of a West Indian who returns home only to experience the violent shock of contrast between Caribbean reality and the European world he has just left. This is a common experience for West Indians.

The Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos aims at the same type of mockery in works like "Lagarto verde" (Green alligator), "Elegía del Duque de la Mermelada" (Elegy to the duke of Marmalade), and above all "Canción festiva para ser llorada" (Festive song to cry at). In the first two poems, the poet directs grossly insulting barbs at the black man's mimicking of European culture, his forgetting of his own primitive splendor. However, Palés Matos's quips, ostensibly well-meaning and corrective, have a sharper sting than Guillén's or even Césaire's. The opening stanza of "Elegía del Duque de la Mermelada," for example, seeks to reduce the black man's primitive glories to the image "y tus quince mujeres olorosas a selva y a fango" (your fifteen wives smelling of jungle and mud). <sup>25</sup> In "Lagarto verde," the constant comic metaphor equating the black man with a monkey strikes a similarly jarring note, again not relieved by the poet's basic good intentions. The poem begins:

El Condesito de la Limonada,  
juguetón, pequeñín..., una monada,  
  
(The Little Count of Lemonade,  
playful, small . . . , a cute little monkey.)

The pun on *monada* works well in Spanish, for the word *mono* (monkey) can also mean *cute*. The next stanza opens with an unsubtle repetition of the same metaphor:

24. Césaire, *Cabier d'un retour*, 30, 34.

25. Quoted in Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 162.

Mientras los aristócratas macacos  
pasan armados de cocomacacos

(While monkey-faced aristocrats  
pass by armed with *cocomacacos*.)

*Macaco* refers both to a small monkeylike creature and to an ugly person. The term *cocomacaco* is derived from *coco* (coconut) and *macaco*. The final verse ends with the most direct insult:

Allá va entre grotescos ademanes  
multiplicando los orangutanes  
en los espejos de Cristobalón.<sup>26</sup>

(There he goes with his grotesque gestures  
multiplying orangutans  
in the mirrors of Cristobalón.)

Cristobalón is the mock court where the ludicrous Haitian aristocracy holds sway, represented by the Little Count of Lemonade. (Previously, I translated Guillén's term *negro imitamicos* as *mimic man*, in deference to Naipaul, but I might more appropriately have translated it with the familiar Trinidadian Creole expression *follow-fashion monkey*, which would then have introduced the same monkey theme.)

Palés Matos has evidently understood the therapeutic value of the seemingly savage but humorous attack, at least in principle. His attacks are almost as savage as Césaire's—or Naipaul's, for example, in *The Middle Passage*. What separates Guillén and Césaire from Palés Matos and Naipaul is the clear demonstration of commitment, of being one of the beleaguered folk. Palés Matos's "Canción festiva para ser llorada," for example, presents a vision as comprehensively and explicitly West Indian as anything in Césaire and Guillén. The poem in many respects prefigured, and perhaps directly influenced, the works of both those writers. However, the mocking humor fails, striking the reader more like negative vituperation, because of the note of doubt injected by the last intelligible lines:

sólo a veces don Quijote,  
por chiflado y musaraña,  
de tu maritornería  
construye una dulcineada.<sup>27</sup>

(Only at times Don Quixote,

26. *Ibid.*, 161.

27. *Ibid.*, 168–69.

crazy and deformed,  
 out of your gawky servant-girl  
 constructs a fictitious Dulcinea.)

The playful speculation, the art for art's sake, which seems to be at the base of Palés Matos's vision, is directly antithetical to the humor evinced in Guillén and even Césaire. Their humor is not the wistful posturing of an uncommitted dilettante, acting as "objective" observer; it is the ardent response of a believer, committed not to some dubious illusion or "dulcineada" but to a powerful and vibrant reality. Guillén's humor, to speak with certainty only of the principal subject of this book, qualifies as *choteo*, *picong*, signifying, or *mamaguying*.

Léopold Senghor describes African laughter as a compassionate "*réaction vécue*" (vital response) with which human beings confront the inhumane. The incisive insight, sharp wit, and way with words employed to trigger this laughter are manifestations of popular black intellectualism. They involve a "put-down," but one that is effected by an insider and that elicits the warm, rich laughter of the community and, ideally, not too much hostility on the part of the victim.<sup>28</sup> This style of humor is suited to the particular conditions in which neo-Africans have generally found themselves in the Americas; it lightens the immense burden on the individual psyche and functions as a societal control. Perhaps, more than any preexisting cultural communality, the similar historical circumstances are responsible for the analogous nature of the laughter of blacks throughout the Caribbean and, indeed, throughout the Americas. Clearly, both factors contributed. The indisputable fact is that the common African cultural heritage has helped one large group of human beings to confront basic aspects of their own share in the inescapable absurdities of man's condition.

□ □ □

It is ironic and consequently hugely significant that some of Guillén's finest examples of *picong* are to be found in the apparently less characteristic and less picturesque works of his post-revolutionary period. The book *El gran zoo* can be considered an example of high-class *picong* in the best African tradition, a tradition that dates as far back as Aesop and includes various cycles of American folktales—of rabbits, spiders, tigers, *jacoteas* (land turtles), and so on. The original edition of *El gran zoo*, published in 1967, contained thirty-nine poems. The second edition, published

28. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 372. See also my "Popular Black Intellectualism," 45.

in 1971, included one more and also a brief author's prologue, in which Guillén stated that the poems sprang from "the desire to say the same old thing in a new way" (2:492). The first poem appropriately bears the title "Aviso" (Announcement); it is precisely that, an announcement. The second is called "El Caribe" (The Caribe) because it presents the basic Guillenesque vision of the Caribbean. Characteristically brief, this is worth citing in its entirety:

En el acuario del Gran Zoo,  
nada el Caribe.

Este animal  
marítimo y enigmático  
tiene una blanca cresta de cristal,  
el lomo azul, la cola verde,  
vientre de compacto coral,  
grises aletas de ciclón.

En el acuario, esta inscripción:

«Cuidado: muerde»  
(2:225-26)

(In the aquarium of the Great Zoo  
swims the Caribe.

This animal  
lives in water and is enigmatic.  
It has a comb of white crystal,  
a blue back, a green tail,  
a belly of compact coral,  
gray hurricane fins.

On the aquarium, this notice:

"Beware: it bites.")

This poem, serving in effect as the first work, makes the sense of the book perfectly clear and corroborates Guillén's declarations in the prologue that this book follows the same tried-and-true inspirations that inform his entire poetic enterprise. He put this idea another way in the short prologue: "Para hablar claro: la mayor parte de los habitantes de este libro son amigos, enemigos o conocidos del autor" (To put it clearly: the majority of the inhabitants of this book are friends, enemies, or acquaintances of the author) (2:492).

The poem "Las águilas" (The eagles) begins with the direct, almost prosaic line "En esta parte están las águilas" (Over here are the eagles) (2:239). The poem proceeds to review the historical symbology of the eagle: the two-headed eagle; the eagle that appears on coins; the heraldic eagle; the Yankee eagle; the Napoleonic and Roman eagles. The punch line comes with devastating irony:

En fin,  
 el águila  
 de la leche condensada marca «El Águila».  
 (*Un ejemplar  
 realmente original.*)

(2:240)

(Finally,  
 the eagle from  
 that brand of condensed milk called "Eagle."  
 [*A truly  
 original specimen.*])

The butt of sarcastic humor is the notorious American eagle, symbol of the hated oppressors who replaced the Spanish colonizers in 1898 and who held sway until the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959. The mighty symbol of imperialism is reduced to its most ridiculous dimensions—the Caribe has bitten, as the notice fixed to its cage had warned it would. This *reductio ad absurdum* is particularly apt, since the imperialism practiced by the American eagle has always been of an unashamedly economic variety, without any higher cultural or civilizing pretensions. The master of *picong*, the signifying monkey, reduces American imperialism to its basest and truest level, the buying and selling of condensed milk.

The smartman Guillén's ability to *mamaguy* is displayed with no less devastating effect in "Policía" (Police). The poem begins:

Este animal se llama policía.  
 Plantígrado soplador.  
 Variedades: la inglesa, sherlock. (*Pipa.*)  
 Carter, la norteamericana. (*Pipa.*)  
 Alimento normal:  
 pasto confidencial,  
 electrointerrogadoras,  
 comunismo (*internacional*),  
 noches agotadoras  
 de luz artificial.

(2:243)

(This animal is called police.  
 A plantigrade informer.  
 Varieties: British, sherlock. [*Pipe.*]  
 Carter, North American. [*Pipe.*]  
 Normal food:  
 confidential pasture  
 electrointerrogorecorders,

communism [*international*],  
 grueling nights  
 under artificial lights.)

The images are felicitous examples of signifying, “giving fatigue,” “shit talking,” or *mamaguying*. What finer way could be found of “shitting up” a policeman than to call him a “plantigrade” (that is, flat-footed) “informer” (that is, gossip) “macko” who pokes his nose into other people’s business?<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the effect of the jokes is intensified by the use of sweet talk in a context that, according to Abrahams’s analysis, calls for broad talk. The normal diet of the flat-footed gossip who passes himself off as a policeman is described with the wit and wordplay of a seasoned smartman. Since this is really an animal, it feeds on grass. However, the beast is particularly despicable because it thrives on the secrets of others, on the sleazy technology of spying (cleverly evoked by the term *electrointerrogorecorders*), and of course on a fanatical anticommunism.

Guillén reserved the heaviest sarcasm for those closest to him, the local police who undoubtedly harassed him for most of his adult life under the prerevolutionary regimes. He portrayed them as follows:

Son mucho más pequeños los de la raza *policeman*.  
 Metalbotones, chapa. La cabeza  
 formando gorra. Pelaje azul en general.  
 Alimento normal: delincuencia infantil,  
 disturbios, huelgas, raterías.  
 Comunismo (*local*).

(2:243–44)

(Those of the species *policeman* are much smaller.  
 Metalbuttons, badge. Head  
 in the shape of a cap. Hide generally blue.  
 Normal diet: infantile delinquency,  
 disturbances, strikes, pilfering.  
 Communism [*local*].)

The local policeman is essentially the little man, a lesser version of his metropolitan counterpart—thus he is *policeman* in English, not *policía* in Spanish. The final touch is exquisite: on orders from his metropolitan masters, he expands his limited horizons to share in the anticommunist fervor. Naturally, he must content himself with the local brand of this international geopolitical menace. It must

29. “Macko” is a colloquial term used in Trinidad and Tobago to refer to a person who engages in gossip.

surely have been a policeman of this stripe that confronted the killer of the *negrito bembón*.

*El gran zoo* was followed by the book *La rueda dentada* (The cogwheel), first published in 1972. The poet claimed in a sweeping statement, “The entire book is ironic. Which, basically, is nothing more than a continuation of the prevailing tone of my preceding work” (2:509–10). The “Prólogo” to the work quite firmly establishes the playful, ironic mood, as the poet *mamaguys* the readers. The poem presents some seemingly inconsequential musings on the image of a cogwheel with a broken cog; then the fourth stanza addresses the reader directly:

Pudieras, lector, pensar que yo busco  
 meterte en un cuarto cerrado y oscuro,  
 para calentarte de tal modo el seso  
 que exclames con rabia: ¡Demonio, qué es esto!  
 Mas yo me adelanto, y con voz tranquila  
 te digo: ¿Qué pasa, que vas tan de prisa?

No es nada  
 no es nada  
 no es nada  
 no es nada

(2:281–82)

(You might think, reader, that I am trying  
 to put you in a dark, closed room,  
 to fry your brains so that  
 you will scream with rage: Hell, what is this!  
 But I'm getting ahead of myself, and in all tranquillity  
 let me say: What's the matter, what's your hurry?

It's nothing  
 it's nothing  
 it's nothing  
 it's nothing.)

The reader's justifiable concerns about the relevance of the poem—and indeed the book itself, since this poem is the “Prólogo”—are addressed and then exacerbated, for they are not taken seriously. They are nothing. The reader will have to figure it out all alone, presumably by reading the book.

The shocking poem “Digo que no soy un hombre puro” (I tell you I'm not a man of purity) is perhaps the most telling manifestation of the spirit of this book. In this poem, Guillén unleashes a series of overt sexual references as he makes fun of the idea of purity. The

tone is entirely comic, with any possible seriousness softened by the coarse, common humor. The poem begins with the note of casual conversation already set up by "Prólogo":

Yo no voy a decirte que soy un hombre puro.  
Entre otras cosas  
falta saber si es que lo puro existe.

(2:297)

(I am not here to tell you that I am a man of purity.  
Among other things  
we don't even know if purity exists.)

The first stanza continues in this playful vein to establish the irrelevance of purity. With a clever touch, the poet even establishes that purity can be revolting:

¿Acaso has tú probado el agua químicamente pura,  
el agua de laboratorio,  
sin un grano de tierra o de estiércol,  
sin el pequeño excremento de un pájaro,  
el agua hecha no más de oxígeno e hidrógeno?  
¡Puah!, qué porquería.

(2:296)

(Have you ever perchance tasted chemically pure water,  
without a grain of earth or manure,  
without a little bird excrement,  
water composed solely of oxygen and hydrogen?  
Pah! what an awful taste.)

From this relatively innocent beginning, the next stanza turns to the concept of sexual purity, which is rejected for the same reasons the poet rejected pure water. Again, he skillfully elicits the reader's emotional identification with his position. He makes his impurity attractive and "natural": he is not a pure man because he loves "women, naturally." He continues:

y me gusta comer carne de puerco con papas,  
y garbanzos y chorizos, y  
huevos, pollos, carneros, pavos,  
pescados y mariscos,  
y bebo ron y cerveza y aguardiente y vino,  
y fornico (incluso con el estómago lleno).

(2:297)

(and I like to eat pork and potatoes,  
and chick-peas and sausages, and

eggs, chickens, lamb, turkey,  
 fish and shellfish,  
 and I drink rum and beer and brandy and wine,  
 and I fornicate [even on a full stomach].)

The images are earthy, exuding the same authentic, unrefined spirit of the street as the original *son* poems. The final image above introduces the sexual theme, which will predominate in the rest of the poem. The basic argument established in the first stanza is applied again, evoking the reader's sympathy, in the closing couplet of this section:

creo que hay muchas cosas puras en el mundo  
 que no son más que pura mierda.

(2:297)

(I think that there are many pure things in this world  
 that are nothing more than pure shit.)

The rest of the poem plays out a mocking reversal of established order in its nonsense, "slackness," or "shit talk," couched in uncharacteristic sweet, rather than broad, talk. Examples of contradictory purity abound:

Por ejemplo, la pureza del virgo nonagenario.  
 La pureza de los novios que se masturban  
 en vez de acostarse juntos en una posada.  
 .....  
 La pureza de la que nunca parió.  
 La pureza del que no engendró nunca.  
 La pureza del que se da golpes en el pecho, y  
 dice santo, santo, santo,  
 cuando es un diablo, diablo, diablo.

(2:298)

(For example, the purity of a virgin in his nineties.  
 The purity of young sweethearts who masturbate  
 instead of sleeping together in a motel.

.....  
 The purity of a woman who never gave birth.  
 The purity of a man who never sired a child.  
 The purity of the one who beats his chest, and  
 says, holy, holy, holy,  
 when he is a devil, devil, devil.)

Like revoltingly pure water, chastity is painted as sterile and unappealing, while its opposite is portrayed as seductively natural. Adal-

berto Ortiz, the venerable Ecuadorean poet, novelist, and intellectual of African ancestry, a friend of Guillén, in an informal conversation once described this poem to me as not inconsistent with Guillén's personal style in informal conversation. Some see it as merely the expression of a dirty old man. Certainly the younger Guillén, less secure in his position, would not have dared put in print some of the images cited above, but it is also clear that the spirit of the poem is quintessentially coherent with the rest of his oeuvre. The work ends with a couplet that reaffirms the playful nature of the whole:

Punto, fecha y firma.

Así lo dejo escrito.

(2:298)

(Period, date, and signature.

This is what I wrote.)

The formulaic ending is, of course, totally ironic, as is the entire collection; however, it is not a bitter irony.

*La rueda dentada* contains a wide assortment of poems. Some are overtly political in theme, of the type that many readers expect from Guillén: poems like "Problemas del subdesarrollo" (Problems of underdevelopment), "La herencia" (The heritage), "Burgueses" (Bourgeois people), "Pequeña oda a Viet Nam" (Small ode to Vietnam), or "Ángela Davis." Others are of a lighter nature: poems like "A la Bodeguita" (To the *Bodeguita*), "A un amigo, proponiéndole la reconciliación" (To a friend, proposing a reconciliation), or "A Retamar" (To Retamar), which is literally a toast to his friend Roberto Fernández Retamar. There is a section containing thirty-one witty epigrams, and even a poem written in French. Finally, the book also contains some love poems in a part having as its title the Latin expression "Ex corde" (From the heart). This represents the tapping of a creative vein that the poet tends to leave unexplored—as I will discuss at length in Chapter 5.

□ □ □

In his discussion of signifying, Gates highlights the importance of parody to the Afro-American literary tradition. Quoting Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, he asserts that "the key aspect of signifying . . . is 'its indirect intent or metaphorical reference,' a rhetorical indirection which she says is 'almost purely stylistic.'" He establishes not only that parody is a critical form of signifying, but also that it is the most fruitful for literature. He claims, for example, that Ralph Ellison "in his fictions signifies upon [Richard] Wright by parodying

Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference." According to Gates's analysis, the most complete artistic manifestation of signifying through parody is to be found in Ishmael Reed's works: "In six demanding novels, Reed has criticized, through signifying, what he perceives to be the conventional structures of feeling that he has received from the Afro-American tradition."<sup>30</sup> Of course, Reed's consummate parody is his novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, and its pastiche format is its most important signifying device.

Guillén's book *Diario que a diario* functions in the same way as Reed's novel. It parodies and signifies on our received notions of Cuban history (a history that is representative of the epic confrontation between Europe and Africa that created America) precisely through the creation of a pastiche of normal historical documents.<sup>31</sup> Augier more or less makes the same point when, in his general statement about the work, he asserts, "In this work . . . Guillén uses newspaper advertisements, pamphlets and newspaper articles, general advertisements, and so on, in order to outline the various stages of the history of Cuba, clearly not in any systematic way, but rather as poetic evocations charged with satire and irony that are consistent with the unswerving ideological direction of his entire poetic output" (2:522). Augier contrasts "systematic" with "poetic" and thereby displays a theoretical shortcoming, for certainly Guillén's work is systematically poetic, as Augier himself realizes.

*Diario que a diario* is sustained artistically by its irony and sarcasm. It is an experimental work, but the experimental form is not divorced from the content, as the poet is manifestly seeking a new way to express his central poetic vision. Experimentation for the old master was a way of keeping young, of staying alive. Gates's analysis has helped us see that this new form is a frank parody in the Afro-American tradition. The success of the parody depends on the ability to provoke a smile, a laugh, or even a guffaw in the reader. The sense of the work is made abundantly clear through the opening piece. Entitled "Avisos, mensajes, pregones" (Notices, messages, street cries), it bears the subtitle "Prologuillo no estrictamente necesario" (A not strictly necessary little prologue) and reads as follows:

Primero fui el notario  
 polvoriento y sin prisa,  
 que inventó el inventario.  
 Hoy hago de otra guisa:

30. Gates, *Black Literature*, 291, 293, 297.

31. This is, of course, precisely Vera Kutzinski's thesis in *Against the American Grain*, a work that I had the pleasure of reading after I had completed my own manuscript.

soy el diario que a diario  
 te previene, te avisa  
 numeroso y gregario.  
 ¿Vendes una sonrisa?  
 ¿Compras un dromedario?  
 Mi gran stock<sup>1</sup> es vario.  
 Doquier<sup>2</sup> mi planta pisa  
 brota lo extraordinario.

PROBLEMAS DE PURISMO. <sup>1</sup>*Stock*, voz inglesa.

<sup>2</sup>*Doquier*, arcaísmo. Mas para nuestra empresa, todo es uno y lo mismo.

LA DIRECCION

(2:371)

(At first I was the notary,  
 dust covered and unhurried,  
 who invented the inventory.  
 Today I have another style:  
 I am the daily that daily  
 warns you, informs you  
 frequently and gregariously.  
 Are you selling a smile?  
 Are you buying a dromedary?  
 My great stock<sup>1</sup> is varied.  
 Wheresoever<sup>2</sup> I go  
 Marvels spring up.

PROBLEMS WITH PURITY. <sup>1</sup>*Stock*, an English word.

<sup>2</sup>*Wheresoever*, archaic form. But for our enterprise, it's all the same.

THE MANAGEMENT.)

The tone is similar to that of the preceding book, but, as this first poem announces, the form will be more radically experimental. The implied author assumes the identity of a "diario que a diario," a daily that daily warns and informs. Guillén made his living as a journalist after his early, very poetic rejection of the forensic profession. It is fitting, then, that this expression of satirical, therapeutic, socially conscious, reform-oriented, neo-African humor takes the form of a parody entitled *Diario que a diario*.

The piece "Esclavos europeos" (European slaves) parodies as it replicates the documents of the nefarious colonial Cuban society. One document, entitled "Fuga" (Runaway), begins:

Ha fugado de casa de su amo  
 un blanco de mediana estatura,  
 (2:379)

(A medium-built white male  
has run away from his master's house.)

The notices, announcements, flyers, and pamphlets are not limited to the colonial period, however, as the following piece demonstrates:

---

AUTOS, TRACTORES Y CAMIONES FORD

FORD NO ES UNA PALABRA, ES  
UNA INSTITUCION

---

(2:414)

---

FORD CARS, TRACTORS, AND TRUCKS

FORD IS NOT JUST A WORD, IT IS  
AN INSTITUTION

---

In the poet's view, the two different public notices from two distinct epochs in Cuban history represent mere variations on the theme of imperialism and exploitation. One of the more delightful pieces, laid out in the fashion of the announcement cited above, is one that hawks the services of an old-time carpenter:

Se reparan vírgenes  
Todos los días (excepto los domingos) al lado de la catedral.  
(2:402)

(Virgins restored  
Every day [except Sundays] beside the cathedral.)

Even in his seventieth year the old *sonero* clearly had not lost his touch.

□ □ □

Guillén is not the only Hispanophone poet with a sense of humor. West Indians and neo-Africans in general are not the only writers in the Western world who have a distinct sense of humor. But Guillén's humor is clearly related in a fundamental fashion to a brand of wit that many experts have claimed with appropriate demonstration to be characteristically African and neo-African. The humor one finds in Guillén is the same kind of humor found in the Mighty Sparrow,

Gerardo Maloney, or Quince Duncan (or any one of the many smartmen that one can find in all parts of the Caribbean). It is reasonable to assert that the strain of humor that is central to Nicolás Guillén's poetic art is eminently and demonstrably West Indian.

## The Hero

In the two preceding chapters I examined aspects of Nicolás Guillén's art that related principally to the creative personality of the author, or, in the more precise language of a school of criticism that was once very fashionable, to the "implied author." The symbol studied in this chapter is both an author's creation and an aspect of the author—as a real person and as the creative principle that composed the poems of Nicolás Guillén. For Nicolás Guillén was the Poeta Nacional, the canonized literary hero of his native land; he was, as well, the singer of other heroes. In both cases the concept of *hero* is intimately connected to that of the smartman, for the hero in the Caribbean is a picaresque trickster, the ultimate *cimarrón* (maroon).

From his birth in 1902, Guillén's life was contemporaneous with that of the independent, or to be more precise, post-colonial Cuban nation. Cuba came into being as a nation only with the defeat of Spain, in 1898, in the Spanish-American War. The potential of the new historical situation was formalized through the Platt Amendment, whereby the United States became the undisguised neocolonial power to exercise open control, even over the very constitution of the republic that was established on May 20, 1902.<sup>1</sup> Despite

1. This information is taken from the chronologies given in Augier, *Nicolás Guillén*, and Morejón, *Recopilación*. In the same spirit of flagrant expansionism, the U.S. government manipulated the internal political situation in Gran Colombia so that the province of Panama would successfully secede in 1903. The first act of the government of the newly "independent" nation, and in a real sense the primary purpose for which that government was created, was the signing of the Hays-Bunai treaty, which ceded "in perpetuity" to the United

all the talk and the sentiment of nationhood and uniqueness, Cuba, which had been totally vanquished and brutally colonized with the arrival of Columbus, remained in this state of languor until 1959. Its history, then, exactly parallels that of the smaller Anglophone islands of the Caribbean, for they, too, emerged from colonial status only in the sixth decade of the current century.



The trajectory of Nicolás Guillén's life fits most appropriately into the schema developed by Frantz Fanon in his pivotal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*. His schema was later refined by Amílcar Cabral into the full-blown Dialectical Theory of Identification.<sup>2</sup> The theory posits a three-phase evolution of awakening in the native artist or intellectual, the phases being called: Capitulation, Revitalization, and Radicalization. Taking the last one first, the Radicalization phase is the fighting phase, one of revolutionary action, while the Revitalization phase is one of a sentimental romanticizing of Africa and Africanness.

The first phase, the Capitulation phase, is one of complete colonial or neocolonial languor. The native prides himself on being fully assimilated. To paraphrase the words of the radical young West Indians who in 1932 launched the first and only issue of *Légitime Défense*, the native makes it a point of honor that a white could read his work without discerning it was written by a black.<sup>3</sup> Guillén, the mulatto—in his own words “bastante claro ‘y de pelo’” (with quite a fair skin and “good” hair)—was caught for a time in the trap of Capitulation, his creativity bound by a blind desire for acceptance and assimilation.<sup>4</sup> His first works were cast in the mold of Rubén Darío; he was a post-modernist no different from the other young Hispanophone poets of his day. Of course, since “the poet cannot lie” and Guillén declared his poetry to be “coherente consigo misma” (coherent within itself), indications of the defining artistic personality can be found even in the poetry of those early years.<sup>5</sup>

Three sonnets entitled “Al margen de mis libros de estudio” (In the margins of my text books) spring from a heroic soul committed to liberation and reflect the poet's essential opting for art over a stifling, practical, career-oriented lifestyle. However, the liberation

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States a strip of land ten miles wide that cut through the center of the new nation. This was for the purpose of constructing the Panama Canal.

2. See my “The African Heritage in Spanish Caribbean Literature,” 23.

3. See Lilyan Kesteloot, *Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature*, 29.

4. Guillén, *Prosa de prisa*, 1:5.

5. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 57.

consistent with the Capitulation phase is the liberation of European romanticism and post-romanticism so cleverly aped by the Euro-Hispanic American poets, Rubén Darío being the most adept. The young Guillén's ideal is evoked quite clearly in the first line of the first sonnet, written in 1922: "Yo, que pensaba en una blanca senda florida" (I, who dreamt of a white flowered path) (1:80). The sentiment is modernist to the extreme, with a hyperactive poetic ego of the kind so tellingly expressed in Darío's declaration "mi literatura es mía en mí" (my literature is mine in me) and exuding the inordinate individualism that the romantic revolution represented.<sup>6</sup> The *blanca senda florida* is simply a modernist cliché; and the capital city of the modernist *locus amenus* (pleasant place) "realidad de ensueño" (land of dreams and fantasy) is Paris, of course. The honest, but assimilated, twenty-year-old poet baldly attested to this in the line "Paris es sueño y es realidad la Habana" (Paris is the dream and Havana the reality) (1:81).

The inertia of slavish imitation was, however, energized by the tension of the artist's thirst for honesty, expressed through the clash between ideal—*ensueño*—and reality. The conflict raging in the depths of the poet's soul is relived in an intense final tercet of his third sonnet:

tendré que ahogar, señores, mi lírica demencia  
 en los considerandos de una vulgar sentencia  
 o en un estrecho artículo del Código Penal...

(1:82)

(Gentlemen, I shall have to stifle my lyrical dementia  
 according to some vulgar legal pronouncement  
 or some narrow-minded article of the Penal Code.)

Guillén was to resolve this essential contradiction with a heroic choice, placing the uncertainty of commitment to his *lírica demencia* above the vulgar certitudes of a carefully planned future as a lawyer. He threw himself into the sea of art and life, a young man in tune with his world and fully conscious of its most profound implications yet ready to opt for the nonpragmatic course of action demanded by his beloved muses.

When, in the prevailing Euro-Hispano-American cultural milieu, emphasis shifted from modernism to the somewhat outlandish, radical expressions of vanguardism, Guillén—ever the creator of a poetry "coherente consigo misma"—shifted as well and produced his futurist poems such as "El aeroplano," "Futuro," or "El reloj"

6. Rubén Darío, *Prosas profanas*, 10.

(The clock), and his daring *poète-maudit*-style "Sol de lluvia" (Sun and rain). He saw his art as a product of the substantially Eurocentric culture of the dominant Cuban minority.



Fanon offers one of the best explanations of the complex psychic condition of the countless human beings throughout the long history of mankind who, like Guillén during the Capitulation phase, have drunk deeply of the colonial experience. In Fanon's opinion, the colonial world is an essentially polarized, Manichaeic universe, one element being all good, the other all bad. This formulation adequately addresses the state of affairs in Spanish Caribbean literature. Consequent upon the brutal destruction of a thriving indigenous civilization and also upon the barbarous transplanting of millions of Africans, a basic duality was manifested in Caribbean literary expressions after the establishment of the Spanish colonial system. An oral and a scribal literature developed. Traditionally the written or scribal literature is the only one that has ever been recognized, but for a true Caribbean literature to emerge, this Manichaeic gap between oral and scribal literatures would have to be closed.<sup>7</sup>

In the Caribbean region the process of closing the gap between oral and scribal expressions began in earnest during the early years of the present century. In an individual artist or intellectual, on the other hand, the Manichaeic gap can only close after his intense artistic thrust alerts him to the incompleteness of his sense of identity. In Guillén this awareness evolved alongside his growing consciousness of the harsh realities of the apartheid model of race relations imposed by the neocolonist U.S. presence, a model that exacerbated the precarious situation of the mulatto.

In the Manichaeic world one is either colonized or colonizer, and mulattoes opted for, and were permitted to side with, the latter. Unused to the subtleties demanded by the demographic logic of Caribbean and South American colonialism, the U.S. occupation forces respected and recognized only the stark, pristine simplicity of the colonial situation. Mulattoes like Guillén found themselves losing their relatively privileged position in society.<sup>8</sup> As a lawyer Guillén might have been sheltered from some of the brutal rigors of

7. This paragraph is taken from my "The African Heritage," 23.

8. The same phenomenon occurred in Haiti as a consequence of the U.S. invasion and occupation from 1915 to 1934. This phenomenon accounted, in large measure, for the intensified level of national self-consciousness experienced by the Haitian intellectual community.

the new style of racism, but having opted for the pursuit of his *lirica demencia* he lost all his buffers.

With characteristic honesty he confronted the new order of things in his pivotal article "El camino de Harlem" (The road to Harlem), which appeared in the newspaper supplement "Ideales de una raza" (Ideals of a race) on April 21, 1929. In this article, he expressed his shock at suffering from discrimination in spite of being "un mulato bastante claro 'y de pelo.'" Race consciousness had become an important dimension of the poet's self-awareness, of his existential logic, and therefore of his art; and once Guillén grew conscious of the Capitulation phase, his reaction was predictable, evidencing the same heroism that is at the heart of "Al margen de mis libros de estudio."

The cultural atmosphere of the 1920s also promoted race consciousness. The medium through which much of the new ferment was given expression was the Sunday supplement "Ideales de una raza," of the mainstream, otherwise consistently Eurocentric newspaper *Diario de la Marina*. Angel Augier, in his prologue to the collection of Guillén's prose writings entitled *Prosa de prisa*, affirms that this supplement played a decisive role in the poet's artistic and intellectual development: "In this forum, as from December of 1928, Guillén would find the most important outlet not only for his poetic work, but also for his early journalistic output."<sup>9</sup>

In December 1929, the poem "Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano" was published for the first time in "Ideales de una raza," with the title "Pequeña oda a Kid Chocolate" (Small ode to Kid Chocolate). Kid Chocolate was "the fighting name of the Cuban boxer Eligio Sardiñas, who around that time captured two world titles in the United States" (1:486). He was one of a long and continuing line of world-class African-ancestored pugilists. The sentiments expressed in the poem still have resonance today, more than half a century later. The world presented in this poem is larger than before and, significantly, its center is no longer Paris but New York. The *blanca senda florida* of old has become the harsh, asphalt heart of the modern metropolis, Broadway:

ese mismo Broadway,  
es el que estira su hocico con una enorme lengua húmeda,  
para lamer glotonamente  
toda la sangre de nuestro cañaverl.

(1:119)

(That same Broadway  
is the one that stretches out its snout and its enormous wet tongue,

9. Guillén, *Prosa de prisa*, 1:viii.

to suck up gluttonously  
all the lifeblood of our cane field.)

The dream has turned into a veritable nightmare. Whereas the contrast between the Paris of the poet's fantasy and the Havana of his reality was one of those existential clashes generating a trendy poetic angst in the individual artist, the relationship between Cuba and the "Norte . . . fiero y rudo" (The neighbor to the north . . . wild and crude) (1:118) is devastating, not just to a young poet's sensibility but to the entire nation. The Havana of the former period is now "nuestro cañaveral," being sucked into oblivion. The image is particularly apt as it has profound roots in the new social consciousness; sugarcane was then—and, it would appear, continues to be—the very lifeblood of the national economy. The symbol of sugarcane, indeed, enters into the defining element of Caribbean society.

Guillén's identification with the plight of his people and his nation is made clear through the use of the first-person plural, in marked contrast with the first-person singular of "Yo, que pensaba en una blanca senda florida" (1:80). The poetic "I" in that case, based on the cultural context, was an expression of self-affirming romanticism. The modernist, neoromantic sense of individual growth colored that entire poem, from the opening line "Yo, que pensaba . . ." to the first line of the final tercet of the third and final sonnet, "[Yo] tendré que ahogar, señores, mi lírica demencia." The "yo" and the "mi" must be read as resonances of Rubén Darío's notorious "mi literatura es mía en mí." On the other hand, the "nuestro" in this later poem is clearly a version of José Martí's powerful image "nuestra América."<sup>10</sup> Guillén's version is rooted in a solid appreciation of the *realidad circundante* (existential reality), which is no longer seen as a rude intrusion into the poet's ivory tower but as the sweaty embrace of a real people who have been brutalized by neo-colonialism.

Whereas the poet's artistic horizons had changed, the fundamental attitude of heroic commitment to art remained firmly in place. His newly defined commitment led him to a different kind of confrontation and a different set of choices, but, as in the sonnets of 1922, he opted heroically for the path (or *senda*) that was most consistent with the fulfillment of his artistic vocation. In fact, the very debate or quest itself not only shaped his poetic personality but continued to be the very stuff of his poems. Art blended imperceptibly with life in 1929 as it had done in 1922.

10. See José Martí, *Páginas escogidas*, 1:157-68.

The factor that, more than any other, accounts for Guillén's deepened sensibility is his evolving sense of belonging to a clearly defined ethnic group. In this respect Guillén the man—as both the real and the implied author—calls to mind Trumper, the fictional Caribbean character of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*. He is illuminated and in turn illuminates us all with the wondrous vision of “my people,” with all the attendant implications. The Trinidadian oral poet Black Stalin, one of Guillén's artistic progeny, was illuminated by the same vision and gave it expression in his 1979 kaiso “The Caribbean Man.”<sup>11</sup>

The final stanza of the “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano,” with the direct emotion that readers now expect in Guillén, reflects the poet's evolved consciousness:

Y ahora que Europa se desnuda  
para tostar su carne al sol  
y busca en Harlem y en La Habana  
jazz y son,  
lucirse negro mientras aplaude el bulevar,  
y frente a la envidia de los blancos  
hablar en negro de verdad.

(1:120)

(And now that Europe bares herself  
to toast her body in the sun  
and comes to Harlem and Havana looking for  
jazz and son,  
show off your true blackness to the applause of the boulevard,  
and to the envy of whites  
speak with an authentic black voice.)

The sweaty embrace of the *realidad circundante*, symbolized by a particular Afro-Cuban, Kid Chocolate, a representative of the toiling, oppressed masses, has inspired a declaration of identity. The paradigm “Paris equals *ensueño* / La Habana equals *realidad*” has

11. See George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, 294–301. The chorus of Black Stalin's oral poem is:

Them is one race  
The Caribbean man  
From the same place  
The Caribbean man  
That make the same trip  
The Caribbean man  
On the same ship  
The Caribbean man.

been radically altered. Paris and Europe are no longer the ultimate models or sources of artistic excellence; on the contrary, they come to La Habana to seek cultural, even physical rejuvenation, because La Habana is now seen as infused with its own invigorating Africanness and is now linked to Harlem. The *blanca senda florida* has completed its metamorphosis, becoming the *bulevar* avidly in search of authentic Africanness. In the face of this new order of things, the poet's response is sure and baldly declared: "frente a la envidia de los blancos / hablar en negro de verdad."

The interpretation advanced for this poem is substantiated not only intratextually but extra- and intertextually as well. Within a month of its publication, Guillén first met Langston Hughes, also "bastante claro 'y de pelo,'" and a poet who, like Trumper, had developed a particularly keen understanding of "my people." Apparently Guillén had been unaware of Hughes's exact racial composition, and the shock of discovery swept away his final hesitation. The Cuban entered the second phase of Fanon's three-phase theory of identification, the Revitalization phase, a sort of "nouveau-noir" romanticizing of Africanness.

According to Fanon, in this phase the native decides to remember who he is. There is a definite sense of having awakened from sleep into a new and ironically dreamlike world—but already, underneath, the laughter of true authentic commitment can be heard. Guillén's own account of the genesis of the signal *son* poems corroborates Fanon's insights for the Revitalization phase. The poet fully abandons the "upper half" of his artistic paradigm and plunges himself compulsively into the warm flesh of the world, the "lower half," the reality. Like Aimé Césaire's sense of negritude, Guillén's art now "thrusts into the red flesh of the soil," it becomes:

flesh of the flesh of the world  
panting with the very movement of the world  
Tepid dawn of ancestral virtues.

Guillén, like a black Orpheus, hurls himself into the hell of his deliberately forgotten history and sense of identity, to rescue the beautiful Eurydice of his creative imagination. But his descent into the "surréalité africaine" is turbulent, almost prelogical, and it causes him to fall prey to the excesses of the so-called Afro-Antillean school.<sup>12</sup>

Guillén's poem "Mulata," more perhaps than any other, shows

12. Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour*, 116, 118. See Aliko Songolo, "Le Surréalisme français et la surréalité africaine dans l'oeuvre poétique d'Aimé Césaire," 14–16.

that the moral imperative dominating the poet's artistic vocation has become fully race conscious, in fact, clamorously so. He who just a few months before spoke the old language of racism, referring to himself as "bastante claro 'y de pelo,'" now explodes into feverish expression of his newfound identity:

Ya yo me enteré, mulata,  
mulata, ya sé que dise  
que yo tengo la narise  
como nudo de cobbata.

Y fíjate bien que tú  
no ere tan adelantá,  
poqqe tu boca e bien grande,  
y tu pasa, colorá.

.....

Si tú supiera, mulata,  
la veddá;  
¡que yo con mi negra tengo,  
y no te quiero pa na!

(1:104)

(I hear the talk, brownskin girl,  
brownskin girl, I know how you saying  
I have a nose  
just like a water hose.

Well you better look good  
you not too white yourself neither,  
your mouth kind of big  
and you dye your dry-up head

.....

Let me tell you, brownskin girl  
plain;  
I well happy with my black woman  
and I don't want you no way!)

The colorful negro talk was abandoned in all his works after these initial eight *son* poems. The focus of the poem is almost puerile, springing from a still imperfect race consciousness. In fact it is difficult to find any other stated preference for the *mulata* over the *negra*, or vice versa, even after a most careful reading of his works.<sup>13</sup>

13. See my "Mulatez and the Black *Mujer Nueva* in Guillén's Poetry" for further discussion of this point.

However, the abiding value of the work is its evidencing of Guillén's sterling adherence to all the demands and ramifications of his artistic vocation. He is a man whose work is courageously, even heroically, "coherente consigo misma."

□ □ □

The effervescence eventually fizzled out, leaving solid matter behind, and Guillén passed into the third phase of the native intellectual's evolution, the Radicalization phase, which Fanon called "the fighting phase." Now the native artist "turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. . . . The native intellectual nevertheless sooner or later will realize that you do not show proof of your nation from its culture but that you substantiate its existence in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation."<sup>14</sup>

"West Indies, Ltd," the title poem of a short collection published in 1934, signaled Guillén's full evolution into this third phase. Angel Augier points out that those days of 1934 were "days of intense revolutionary agitation of the masses." The dictator Machado had been overthrown in 1933, but the aspirations of the masses were frustrated by the rise to power of the commander of the army, one Fulgencio Batista, "who at that time was beginning his career as the unconditional agent of North American financial interests" (1:494).

The poem "Sabás," dedicated to Langston Hughes, best captures for the general reader the spirit of this little book and of this new phase. It begins:

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.)

(1:140)

(I saw Sabás, the innocuous negro,  
begging his bread from door to door.  
Why, Sabás, the open hand?  
[This Sabás is a good negro.]

With heavy sarcasm, a therapeutic and politically conscious humor, the poet hopes to jolt Sabás out of his complicity in his own oppression. The next two stanzas of the poem are similar in form and

14. Fanon, *The Wretched*, 179.

content; they are four-line, fully rhyming verses. Having set the stage with this introduction, the poet becomes ever more explicit in his exhortations to revolutionary action, and he changes from the four-line stanzas to longer stanzas with a less regular meter but an equally consistent rhyme scheme:

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:

.....

¡Caramba, Sabás, que no se diga!

.....

La muerte, a veces, es buena amiga,  
 y el no comer, cuando es preciso  
 para comer, el pan sumiso,  
 tiene belleza. El cielo abriga.

.....

¡Caramba, Sabás, no seas tan loco!  
 ¡Sabás, no seas tan bruto,  
 ni tan bueno!

(1:141)

(Get up and get your bread, don't just beg for it;  
 get up and get your light, your true hope,  
 grab hold of the reins, man.  
 Plant yourself squarely in the door,  
 but not with outstretched hand,  
 nor with your crazy good behavior:

.....

Come on, Sabás, get yourself together!

.....

Death, at times, can be a good friend,  
 and hunger, if eating means having  
 to swallow the bread of submission,  
 can be beautiful. Heaven protects us.

.....

Come on, Sabás, don't be so crazy!  
 Sabás, don't be so stupid,  
 don't be so good!

Sabás is a black man, but his situation transcends racial identification. He is a representative of the oppressed, one of the "wretched of the earth." The poet proposes the heroic course of liberation and cleverly works up to an intense rhythmic pitch that matches the escalation in his advice. He convinces the reader to assent to the proposition that sanity is madness and goodness is stupid, hence evil. Thus commitment to the revolutionary struggle is the only sound choice.

Having joined the Communist party in 1937, Guillén in a real sense pulled himself up from his Orphic plunge into the "red soil of the world" of Fanon's second phase. In the governing schema of Guillén's art, Paris and New York were now definitively replaced by Moscow, because the poet deemed this to be consistent with his artistic vocation. The direction now taken was one to which he would always remain faithful. It was in May 1937 that his small collection of poems entitled *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas* (Chants for soldiers and *sones* for tourists) was published in Mexico. The collection was dedicated to his father "muerto por soldados" (killed by soldiers) in 1917 during a dirty little race war stirred up essentially by the U.S. occupation. Like his father, who had been a senator as well as a newspaper publisher, Guillén now became an activist, and not only through his art. Previously, he had instinctively shied away from political militancy, but now, twenty years after the assassination that traumatized his teenage existence, he could face with heroic equanimity his own immersion in the hurly-burly of politics.

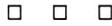
Marxism is antithetical to race consciousness, focusing exclusively on the class struggle. However, Guillén's artistic and intellectual evolution culminated in his commitment to this political doctrine, in a progression that is consistent with Fanon's analysis, for Marxism represents the highest form of commitment to revolutionary struggle, a complete refinement of the imperfect exoticism of Fanon's second phase. Clearly, class consciousness superseded race consciousness. The poet explicitly rejected negritude as an end in itself: "There are times—certain moments in history—when negritude is tied to national liberation movements, but it cannot possibly be considered a political position à outrance; if it were it would become another form of racism."<sup>15</sup> Many African-ancestored artists and intellectuals evince a compulsion to separate themselves as quickly as possible from the appearance of racial self-affirmation, mistakenly taking this for an enlightened universalism.<sup>16</sup> In Gui-

15. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 45.

16. The exigencies of good scholarship must be balanced by the demands of

llén's case (as is quite typical) his undue, but perfectly understandable, haste to achieve the post-race-conscious stage of intellectual development caused him to overlook certain potentially fruitful artistic veins (the use of Creole, for example).

The poet, as always, was motivated by what he deemed the exigencies of his art, art that had become indissolubly linked to the heroic struggle for liberation. According to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, a commentator on Caribbean culture, resistance is central to Caribbean literature. In his book Cudjoe argues convincingly, "in analyzing Caribbean literature, an understanding of history in general and the role of resistance in particular becomes indispensable."<sup>17</sup> Guillén's art, then, is true to the driving force of a quintessentially Caribbean aesthetic.



The most enduring symbol, the representative figure par excellence, of this aspect of the poet's central *cimarronaje* is the poetic persona and real-life hero, Jesús Menéndez. Guillén's poem "Elegía a Jesús Menéndez" constitutes the apotheosis of Jesús Menéndez, and I will examine the poem in detail later in this chapter. It was appropriately placed in the book *La paloma de vuelo popular*, which was published in 1958, at the predawn of Guillén's new life as established poetic representative of the new Cuba, consequent on his induction into the pantheon of living revolutionary heroes.

The book opens with a densely significant poem, "Arte poética." Strategically placed at the zenith of his artistic evolution, the poem reaffirms the principles on which Guillén's art was built. It begins:

Conozco la azul laguna  
y el cielo doblado en ella.  
Y el resplandor de la estrella.  
Y la luna.

(2:7)

(I know the blue lagoon  
and the sky reflected in it.  
And the splendor of the stars.  
And the moon.)

---

good taste in this instance, and I refrain from naming names. Suffice it to say that I have at times encountered stiff resistance to my African-centeredness from African-ancestored scholars and even top administrators, who lay claim to being "multiethnic," "nonethnocentric," "universal," "West Indian," "American"—anything but black or African.

17. Cudjoe, *Resistance and Caribbean Literature*, 73.

The lyrical lines resonate with the spirit of Rubén Darío—who began the song celebrating his own zenith, *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (Songs of life and hope), with an undeclared yet very real *ars poetica* in the following, immortal quartet:

Yo soy aquel que ayer no más decía  
el verso azul y la canción profana,  
en cuya noche un ruiseñor había  
que era alondra de luz por la mañana.<sup>18</sup>

(I am the one who yesterday spoke only  
my blue verses and my profane song,  
in whose night there was always a nightingale  
that in the morning light became a lark.)

Darío's poem is the expression of a mature man chastened by life, who rejects the excesses of youth and opts for life over literature. The "verso azul" and the "canción profana" that he repudiates represent the stylized, artificial exoticism of early modernist exuberances—his poems of *Azul* (1888) and *Prosas profanas* (1896) with their "literatura mía en mí."

Guillén in the fervor of the second, Revitalization phase explicitly repudiated his own "Balada azul" (Blue ballad) and the other works of the first, Capitulation phase. Ironically, the triumph of the revolution vitiated these repudiations, and the poet in fact returned to the "canteras [que] quedaron sin explotar," those artistic areas that had remained unexplored because of the demands of the revolutionary struggle.<sup>19</sup> While Darío's poem bespeaks a newfound identification with the masses, and while his "horror a la literatura"<sup>20</sup> is really a form of affirming the humanized mellowing of his art, the same mellowing, at one stage, necessitated in Guillén the repudiation of his own "Balada azul" but, as the poet's circumstances changed, his artistic response correspondingly evolved. The movement toward balance and fruitfulness took Guillén back to the "verso azul" and the "canción profana," now freed of any unrefined egoism. While Darío, in his new mellowness, turned to the masses for sustenance, Guillén had already done so. In his "Arte poética" he reaffirmed the primacy of the "vuelo popular," extending its salutary influence even over the "balada azul."

The poet who knows the beauty of the sky reflected in the blue

18. Rubén Darío, *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, 25.

19. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 53.

20. Darío, *Cantos*, 29.

waters of a lake, and the glow of the stars and the moon, was also infused with a sense of reality:

¿Y el plomo que zumba y mata?  
 ¿Y el largo encierro?  
 ¡Duro mar y olas de hierro,  
 no luna y plata!

(2:7)

(And the lead that hums and kills?  
 And the long imprisonment?  
 The harsh sea and waves of iron  
 not of any silvery moon!)

The harsh reality of economic exploitation, of brutal oppression and repression, continued to preoccupy the poet. These were, in fact, nagging questions that he had to face. So the poem ends with a series of injunctions beginning in the penultimate stanza:

Se alza el foete mayoral.  
 Espaldas hierre y desgarrá.  
 Ve y con tu guitarra  
 dílo al rosál.

(2:7)

(The overseer's whip is raised.  
 It wounds and rips open backs.  
 Go and with your guitar  
 tell it to the rosebush.)

Darío, of course, never achieved this mix of beauty with harsh reality and commitment to the suffering masses. In this poem, Guillén reaffirms his commitment to the exigencies of his art as well as to his assumed constituents, the "wretched of the earth" and, in particular, those of the Caribbean who have been scarred by the brutal reality of sugar and slavery.

Jesús Menéndez, the heroic persona par excellence, sprang from the crucible of experience. Consistent with the injunction in Guillén's "Arte poética," the stark circumstances of Menéndez's real life were transformed into a song and sung to the rosebush. The legendary hero was, indeed, a friend and political brother of the poet:

Menéndez and I were very good friends, so much so that when he presented himself—or the party presented him—as a candidate to represent the Popular Socialist party in the province of Las Villas, I was designated by my party to accompany him on a tour of various places in that region. He gave talks and speeches and I recited poems, putting on

between us a kind of politico-cultural evening function in every place that we visited.

Out of the raw material of this existential reality, Guillén created "Elegía a Jesús Menéndez," which he described as "a very complicated poem" that cost him "many hours of work a day."<sup>21</sup> The modern Caribbean hero was a man of the sugarcane field, as the opening line of his elegy evokes: "Las cañas iban y venían" (The sugarcanes moved to and fro), and in order to reach a full understanding of this long and complex poem, it is first necessary to examine the symbolism of the sugarcane, which permeates it.



The venerable West Indian intellectual C. L. R. James has asserted, "The history of the West Indies is governed by two factors, the sugar plantation and Negro slavery."<sup>22</sup> Even though slavery in its most obvious and barbaric form became outmoded as a means of production, the economic system based on the sugar plantation remained in force throughout the entire region well into the latter half of the twentieth century. The resistance that (according to Cudjoe) defines Caribbean culture must, then, inexorably focus on this phenomenon. The Caribbean hero by definition has to be a man of the sugarcane fields, he has to be a *cimarrón*. From the moment the first African was captured, for labor in the Americas, the process of *cimarronaje* was set in motion. The fathers of the Haitian Revolution from 1798 to 1804—Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and others—are still the best known and most vibrant of the line, but the numbers are almost limitless.

Just as *caña* is the key to understanding the Caribbean and is, in fact, the basis of Menéndez's heroism, the image and symbol are appropriately central to Guillén's art. The first line of the elegy lifts Jesús Menéndez immediately into the pantheon of Caribbean heroes through the agency of sugarcane. The appearance of *cañas* on this momentous occasion is consistent with the fundamental cultural fiber of the Caribbean. Indeed, they are personified as well:

Las cañas iban y venían  
desesperadas, agitando  
las manos.  
Te avisaban la muerte,  
la espalda rota y el disparo.  
(1:416)

21. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 51.

22. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 391.

(The sugarcanes moved to and fro  
desperately waving  
their hands.  
They were warning you of your death,  
the pierced back and the shot.)

In Guillén, as in other neo-African poets, the artistic potential of the special affinity between humans and Mother Nature is developed most particularly in the portrayal of the black woman's beauty. Consequently the sugarcane plant, like the palm tree, has been used as a symbol of the black woman's beauty. But the most consistent use of this important symbol, one fashioned from the very core of Afro-Cuban culture, has been in the sociopolitical realm. More than just a woman, the *caña* is the entire community. It is Cuba.

In the poem "Caña" from *Sóngoro cosongo*, Guillén achieved a level of expression in the elaboration of this symbolism that would be equaled but never surpassed in his future works. Nancy Morejón makes the following comments on "Caña":

Its only literary antecedent in our poetry is "La zafra" [Sugar harvest] by Agustín Acosta, which Julio Antonio Mella defines as follows: "'La zafra' is the first great political poem of the final period of the Republic." . . . The majority of our poets, romantics and modernists, alluded to the sugarcane, but as an ornament, as a component of the ecology that just could not be missed thanks to its exuberant nature. They spoke about the sugarcane just as they spoke about palm trees. "La zafra," along with the militant "Poema de los cañaverales" [Poem of the plantations] by Pichardo Moya, banishes this vision of the sugarcane from our poetry, giving it a national character.<sup>23</sup>

Guillén's epigrammatic, anti-imperialistic poem "Caña" reads, in its entirety:

El negro  
junto al cañaveral.

El yanqui  
sobre el cañaveral.

La tierra  
bajo el cañaveral.

¡Sangre  
que se nos va!

(I:129)

23. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 18-19.

(The black  
next to the cane field.

The Yankee  
on top of the cane field.

The land  
below the cane field.

Our blood  
ebbing away!)

The first image springs full-blown from the neo-African worldview that sees fundamental links between the human world and the world of nature. The closing couplet repeats the symbolism, confirming the political sense that was added in the second and third couplets. Despite its brevity the poem evokes an intensely Caribbean spirit: the profound self-affirmation and the rejection of an entire system of subjugation, which has been in place for centuries but which is currently under the aegis of the "Yankee imperialist."

The same image appears in the work "Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano" (written, like "Caña," in 1929) with the same anti-imperialist intention. Broadway, an obvious metonym for North American capitalism, is shown in the malevolent act of greedily sucking away "toda la sangre de nuestro cañaveral." In "Arte poética," the same image has a different twist. It becomes:

El cañaveral sombrío  
tiene voraz dentadura,  
(2:7)

(The somber cane field  
with its voracious teeth.)

Here the metonym works in the opposite fashion: the victim stands for the victimizer. However, the central aesthetic principle that binds man to nature through a profound, philosophically derived series of postulates is clearly responsible for the image.

In the poem "Cañaveral" of *La paloma de vuelo popular*, an animated and bleeding *caña* is evoked as an image and symbol of Cuba's neocolonial status. The poem consists of a *décima espinela*, a canonical Hispanic verse form introduced by a four-line stanza. In fact, the last line of this stanza asserts that the poetic introduction is to a "décima montuna" (2:9), the poet clearly having opted for the denomination more consistent with popular Afro-Cuban culture. The *décima* is spoken by a sugarcane worker and is based on two counterpointed images. The first juxtaposes the sweetness of sugar

with the bitterness of its production—a tried-and-true image. The second is contained in the finale of the work:

Herir la caña me toca,  
 mas el destino es tan fiero,  
 que al golpearla con mi acero  
 ella todo el bien recibe,  
 pues de mi golpe vive  
 y yo de su sangre muero.

(2:9)

(I get to slash the cane,  
 but fate is so fierce  
 that when I hit it with my blade  
 the cane gets all the benefit,  
 because it is fortified by my blows  
 and I die from its blood.)

The blood that flows from the cane is again the lifeblood of the Cuban people—it is the “sangre que se nos va” from the poem “Caña.” However, here, by a particularly cruel irony, it is the oppressed worker who effects the actual spilling of the blood, the sugarcane’s and his own.

Even when the *caña* remains a simple plant, it still carries a powerful emotional charge, for textually and extratextually the term has acquired a symbolic potential that precludes prosaic usage. For example, the poem “Elegía cubana” (Cuban elegy), “written in Havana, probably in 1952” (1:553), and published as one of the six elegies of *La paloma de vuelo popular*, contains the following image:

Cuba, tu caña miro  
 gemir, crecer ansiosa,  
 larga, larga, como un largo suspiro.

(1:390)

(Cuba, I see your sugarcanes  
 groan, grow anxious,  
 long, long, like a long sigh.)

The plant when moved by the wind could, in fact, make a sound like the human groan or sigh. However, as a result of the systematic symbolism Guillén has created, the image immediately evokes in the reader the sense of a living, human cane plant truly groaning and sighing at the plight of the Cuban people.

In the often cited “Balada de los dos abuelos” (the second poem of *West Indies, Ltd*), which evokes the tortured historical rela-

tionship between his two principal ancestors—the “abuelo negro” (black grandfather) and his victimizer, but fellow Cuban, the “abuelo blanco” (white grandfather)—the poet sings:

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

(1:138)

(What a lot of ships, what a lot of ships!  
 What a lot of blacks, what a lot of blacks!  
 What a long smoldering of canes!  
 What a slave driver's whip!)

There is no question of flesh and blood in this usage, but the very mention of *caña* brings an intense poetic charge. The sugarcane is lifted out of its prosaic limitations through the alchemy of art. It becomes more than a mere plant; it is inextricably linked to the terrible experience of a whole people, not merely Cuban but Caribbean.

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Imbued with this poetic power, the *cañas* at the beginning of “Elegía a Jesús Menéndez” will become one of the poem's most important unifying elements. They serve to define Menéndez as a Caribbean hero; their prophetic appearance launches the poem as, animated and anguished with brotherly concern, they warn their hero of impending doom, in the cycle of death and oppression they understand so well. The *cañas* know, as they have known for the four centuries of their existence, that death is the inevitable consequence of the drive for *cimarronaje*. They appear three times in the opening section of the poem, and at each appearance they are *desesperadas*. However, their attitude changes distinctly in the fifth section of the work, once they witness the inevitable sacrifice of this new messiah:

¿Quién vio caer a Jesús? Nadie lo viera, ni aun su asesino. Quedó en pie, rodeado de cañas insurrectas, de cañas coléricas. Y ahora grita, resuena, no se detiene. Marcha por un camino sin término, hecho de tiempo sutil, polvoriento de instantes menudos, como una arena fina. (1:426)

(Who saw Jesús fall? No one saw him, not even his assassin. He remained on his feet, surrounded by mutinous sugarcanes, enraged sugarcanes. And now he shouts, filling the air with sound, he keeps right on. He is on a road without end, made of subtle time, dusty with a multiplicity of instants, like fine sand.)

These *cañas*, which have bonded with the Caribbean man through the alchemy of Guillén's art to become his very blood and to bleed with him, now become agents through which Menéndez's death is channeled into significant revolutionary action. They become "insurrectas" and appropriately "coléricas." In their sight and under their influence, Menéndez sets out on the "camino sin término."

This imagery and its profound symbolism are repeated and expanded in the final section of the poem, effecting the apotheosis of the hero through a secular resurrection. The central mystery of Christianity is reduced to metaphor—as is frequently the case in Hispanic letters and culture. Guillén plays deliberately on Menéndez's first and eminently Christian name. In the original Christian context, after the Resurrection comes Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, traditionally symbolized by the dove, to confirm the commitment of new Christians. One of the great mysteries of Christianity becomes part of the Guillenesque imagery when Menéndez is converted into "la paloma de vuelo popular" in the long final stanza of the poem. So important is this image that the poet made it the title of his entire book.

The argument could be advanced that much of this Christian symbolism already existed in ancient Egypt. Osiris, the most important ancestor or god of the ancient Africans, was essentially a god of resurrection.<sup>24</sup> The association of humans and gods with animals and other aspects of nature was as central to the mythologies and theologies of the ancient Egyptians as it was to the culture of other ancient African peoples—and as it still is to the indigenous cultures of contemporary Africa.<sup>25</sup>

Guillén also draws on the religious tradition generally considered, even by the mainstream of academe and society, to be unequivocally that of the *abuelo africano*. One of the metamorphoses of triumph effected in Jesús Menéndez is presented in the following image from the final stanza:

24. This is the thesis, clearly affirmed in the title, of Wallis Budge's *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*.

25. This particular line of reasoning comes from scholarship that has gained exposure in the wider academic community only very recently. It is reasoning that will lead to many conclusions of immense significance, and it is entirely consonant with my thesis that Guillén's art is fundamentally Caribbean, that is, neo-African. The scholar whose extraordinary academic and administrative energies justify his being considered one of the central figures of this new school is Ivan Van Sertima, editor of the *Journal of African Civilizations*. My discussion of the history of carnival in Chapter 1 and my analysis of the poem "Sensemayá" in Chapter 2 are samples of scholarly results generated by the new line of research.

Entonces llegará,  
 General de las Cañas, con su sable  
 hecho de un gran relámpago bruñido;  
 (1:436)

(Then he will arrive,  
 General Sugarcane, with his saber  
 made of a great burnished lightning bolt.)

Jesús becomes the great Yoruba ancestor and military leader who has been raised to the ranks of the *orishas* (divinities), becoming Shango, the god of thunder. The Shango mythology, in fact, shares certain fundamental elements with that of Osiris. Both gods married their sisters; they were both put to death by envious peers; they both conquered death and were raised to positions of glory in the afterlife. They are both essentially brothers to all people, serving as major connections between humankind and the supernatural and the afterlife. Manuel Zapata Olivella sees Shango as *Changó, el gran putas* (Shango, the "baddest"), which is the title of his imposing 1983 novel. For him, as for Guillén and indeed for the African-ancestored culture, Jesús is a *cimarrón* par excellence.

The triumph of this new Jesús, General Sugarcane, Shango, is manifested when he comes to utter the final words of this long poem:

Para decir:  
 —He vuelto, no temáis.  
 Para decir:  
 —Fue largo el viaje y áspero el camino.  
 Creció un árbol con sangre de mi herida.  
 Canta desde él un pájaro a la vida.  
 La mañana se anuncia con un trino.  
 (1:436)

(To say:  
 —I have returned, fear not.  
 To say:  
 —The journey was long, the way rough.  
 A tree sprang from the blood of my wound.  
 From it a bird sings the song of life.  
 The morning is heralded with that song.)

Shango speaks with a voice clearly reminiscent of the Bible. Syncretism—the blending of Euro-Christian with traditional African religious elements—enters into the forging of Jesús Menéndez's artistic personality, just as it does with the heroes of Quince Dun-

can's novels.<sup>26</sup> The process of syncretism is central to the culture of most Afro-American societies. Consistent with the syncretic approach, Jesús, who had been so clearly identified with Shango, here at the height of the work becomes reidentified with his divine namesake, speaking almost with the same voice as the risen Christ: "He vuelto, no temáis." It is worth noting that in order to achieve the biblical effect Guillén uses the unusual second-person plural form of the verb, "temáis." The images of the closing quartet are materially related to those used at the earlier, majestic moment of metamorphosis when the "cañas" became "insurrectas" and Jesús Menéndez entered upon the "camino sin término." The rhyme in these final four lines is built on *camino/trino* and *berida/vida*. The *camino* is the road to the new dawn, which will later be greeted with the appropriate salutation "Buenos días, Fidel" (Good morning, Fidel) in the final line of the poem "Canta el sinsonte en el Turquino" (A mockingbird sings on *el Turquino*) from *Tengo*. In that poem as well as in this, the singing of birds symbolizes new hope, and the bird is the revolutionary "paloma de vuelo popular" into which Menéndez is converted after his immolation and triumph. His blood, one with the blood of the cane fields, is no longer spilt in vain; it is no longer the "sangre que se nos va." From his blood, from the *berida* of a meaningful death springs the tree of life.

The transcendence of the symbolism fashioning Menéndez's poetic personality does not preclude its being rooted in reality, with even a touch of the prosaic. Thus, in the second section, the blood of sacrifice and national renewal is also seen as:

sangre anunciada, en venta  
una mañana de la Bolsa  
de Nueva York.

(1:418)

(blood offered, for sale  
one morning on the New York  
Stock Exchange.)

The West Indies, as the poet sees it, is a limited company whose spirit is dominated by the demon of international capitalism, the modern incarnation of slavery and the plantation system. Guillén's poetic expression of this tortured reality is suitably tortured, even outlandish:

26. For more on this, see my "Religious Elements in the Narrative of Quince Duncan." Obviously, in the light of emerging scholarship on the relationships between Christianity, Western civilization, and preexisting African civilizations, our current thinking on syncretism will probably have to be revised.

Cuban Company Communes:  
 abre con 5 puntos,  
                   cierra con 5 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>.  
                                   (1:419)

(Cuban Company Common Stock:  
 opens at 5 points,  
                   closes at 5 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>.)

This verse is a stock market report taken straight from the pages of the business section of a newspaper (foreshadowing the later book *Diario que a diario*). In fact, the epigraph introducing this section of the poem is a phrase from the financial section of the *New York Herald Tribune*. The brutality of the plantation system, which was based on the Atlantic slave trade, is replaced by cold-blooded, soulless speculation in the international money markets, which masks, in turn, the brutal reality of the twentieth-century plantation. The Broadway of the earlier poem is seen in its most fitting form, and the bloodsucking operation is exposed in all its stark reality.

The epigraph to the third section of the elegy signals a change in focus, to the actual perpetrator of the crime. The section begins with the lines:

Mirad al Capitán del Odio,  
 entre un buitre y una serpiente;  
                                   (1:422)

(Look at the Captain of Hate  
 half-vulture, half-serpent.)

Consistent with Fanon's theory that the artist in the third phase of his spiritual awakening takes his place in the actual struggle, Guillén evokes the hateful image of the captain who ordered the murder to be committed. In this way, he prepares the way for justice to be done. In fact, the real captain was to be convicted and sentenced upon the triumph of the Cuban revolution, a decade or more after the assassination of Menéndez in 1948.<sup>27</sup>

The lines in this section are technically superb nine-syllable romance lines, instead of the more commonplace eight-syllable lines. This meter immediately recalls the famous verses of the master Rubén Darío in "Canción de otoño en primavera" (Autumn song in spring). The haunting quality of Darío's poem is achieved prin-

27. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 52.

cipally through the repetition every fourth stanza of the immortal quartet:

Juventud, divino tesoro,  
 ¡ya te vas para no volver!  
 Cuando quiero llorar, no lloro ...  
 Y a veces lloro sin querer ...<sup>28</sup>

(Youth, divine treasure  
 you are leaving now forever!  
 When I want to weep, I can't.  
 And at times I weep without wanting to.)

Guillén, for his part, rivets the reader's attention not on the sad inevitability of the aging process but, rather, on the necessity for swift, sure retribution, which he relentlessly invokes. Each of his seven eight-line stanzas ends with the bald declaration "pero tras él corre la Muerte" (but Death runs close at his heels). On one level this refrain expresses the finality of Menéndez's destiny; on the other hand it clearly invokes a similar destiny for the "Capitán del Odio."

Jesús Menéndez is a man of flesh and blood who is clearly circumscribed by his Pan-Caribbean *realidad circundante*. The fourth section begins with the description "Jesús es negro y fino y prócer" (Jesús is black and fine and noble) (1:424). In this vein the third stanza proclaims:

Jesús dice *carro, río, ferrocarril, cigarro*,  
 como un francés renuente a olvidar su lengua  
 de niño, nunca perdida;

pero es cubano y su padre habló con Maceo;  
 (1:424-25)

(Jesús says *carro, río, ferrocarril, cigarro*,  
 like a French speaker reluctant to renounce the language  
 of his childhood, never forgotten;

but he is Cuban and his father spoke with Maceo.)

His "lengua de niño" is the same as Toussaint L'Ouverture's or Henri Christophe's. Hence he pronounces the *rr* of the words cited not with the characteristic Hispanic alveolar trill but rather with the almost guttural articulation associated more commonly with French. His Cuban ties are established with one of the most authentic of that nation's *cimarrones*, Antonio Maceo. This fourth section of the poem amounts essentially to a celebration of the basic Cubanness of

this Haitian migrants' child, the offspring of *negros franceses* whose presence in Cuba is a sign of the fundamental Pan-Caribbean dynamism of the area's population. For the people of this region have, certainly in the past five centuries at least, moved freely from island to island, and from island to mainland, without regard for the linguistic and political barriers imposed by the colonial machine. The fifth section, on the other hand, balances the down-to-earth character of Menéndez's impact with the transcendence of his death and, ultimately, of his life. The page of prose beginning this section itself begins with the sentence "Los grandes muertos son inmortales: no mueren nunca" (Great men, even in death, are immortal: they never die) (1:426).

The sixth section returns the focus to the prosaic socioeconomic impact of Menéndez's twentieth-century *cimarronaje*. This impact resonates beyond Cuba and the Caribbean to all of "nuestra América." From the "cañas míseras" (miserable sugarcanes) of Cuba, he energizes the struggles of the Venezuelan oil-field workers: "los obreros de Zulia cuajados en gordo aceite" (the workers of Zulia coagulating in thick oil) (1:430). He reaches out to the desolate mines of Chile, starkly painted as "las sombrías oficinas del salitre" (the somber offices of the salt mines) (1:430). His influence extends to the river-men of Colombia, "los bogas del Magdalena" (the river-men of the Magdalena) (1:430), who were immortalized in the poetry of Candelario Obeso. The Pan-Caribbean *cimarrón* extends his spiritual force to all the oppressed: in the *favelas* (slums) of Brazil; in the plantations of the Caribbean islands and Mexico; in the bloody silver mines of Peru; in the fields of Argentina, presented simply as "la punta sur de nuestro mapa" (the southern point of our map) (1:431); and in the banana plantations of Central America, that "cinturón de volcanes con que América defiende su ombligo torturado por la United Fruit desde el Istmo roto hasta la linde azteca" (band of volcanoes with which America protects her navel, tortured, from the broken isthmus to the Aztec border, by the United Fruit Company) (1:431). "Nuestra América," in the tradition of Martí and, indeed, of all Latin Americans, includes the land north of the Aztec border; in fact, it begins with "la punta sur de nuestro mapa" and extends north to the frozen lands of Canada.

The sweep of Menéndez's revolutionary influence extends, then, even to the belly of the monster, the neighbor to the north with the two major cities "Washington y Nueva York, donde bulle el festín de Baltasar" (Washington and New York, spewing forth the sounds of Balthasar's orgy) (1:431). In this obscene and grotesque celebration, the odious Uncle Sam toasts the demise of "nuestra América":

Lúbrico mono de pequeño cráneo  
chilla en su mesa: ¡*Por la muerte va!*  
(1:431)

(A lascivious monkey with a small skull  
shrills at his table: *Here's to death!*)

Guillén finds it necessary to return to the normal poetic format to paint this significant scene. The Ku Klux Klan, present at the festivities, is of course a representative figure of the evil machine, along with Jim Crow, Charles Lynch, and William Walker, the carpetbagger who almost single-handedly created the U.S. empire of Central America. The most wretched victims of the beast in his own domains are Menéndez's ethnic brothers and sisters. They look to the salutary effect of the Cuban hero's martyrdom: "Siete voces negras en Martinsville llaman siete veces a Jesús por su nombre" (Seven black voices in Martinsville call out to Jesús seven times by name) (1:433). The poet is familiar with the bloody history of racial oppression in the United States and, as usual, is quick to evoke symbols of that aberration.

This section ends with the clear message that the modern *cimarrón* also comes, in large part, from the contemporary European intellectual tradition of atheism—Nietzsche, Hegel, and the ubiquitous Marx. Guillén pointedly contrasts Jesús with his divine namesake:

Jesús no está en el cielo, sino en la tierra; no demanda oraciones sino lucha; no quiere sacerdotes, sino compañeros; no erige iglesias, sino sindicatos: Nadie lo podrá matar. (1:433)

(Jesús is not in heaven but on earth; he does not call for prayers, but for struggle; he wants no priests, but comrades; he establishes, not churches, but unions: No one can kill him.)

A more Marxist version of the *cimarrón* could not be found. However, he embodies all the basic qualities of the Caribbean hero of the twentieth century, and he is above all, like Guillén, totally committed to the struggle.

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Since any people's literature would naturally exalt the peculiar values and the representative personalities of that culture, it is only to be expected that Caribbean popular literature abounds with celebrations of popular regional heroes, and it is worth noting that other heroic figures are also *cimarrones*. Haiti is where, as Césaire put it with consummate poetry, "Négritude stood up for the first time and swore by its humanity"; it is the very fountainhead of Caribbean heroism. The same Césaire has crystallized the Carib-

bean heroic figure, first generically as “Le Rebèle” in *Et les chiens se taisaient*, and then more specifically as the main character in *Le Roi Henri Christophe*. The same vision is encoded in C. L. R. James’s title for the 1962 appendix to his pivotal 1938 work on the Haitian Revolution: “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro.”<sup>29</sup> Toussaint L’Ouverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean Jacques Dessalines are some of the more remembered heroes, but there were legions of *cimarrones*, all learned in the lore of their ancient civilization and its ways, who helped to create that seminal moment in history, the year 1804, when the defiant resistance of Caribbean culture attained its first great peak. Integral to that resistance was the conviction that the plantation system, inspired by barbaric Eurocentric interest and constructed on the blood of slaves, defiled all human beings by violating the inherent harmonies between man and the cosmos.

Paul Bogle responded to Jamaica’s post-emancipation plantation system with an appropriate form of rebellion, which has been sung in Vic Reid’s powerful novel *New Day*, a novel that exploits to the fullest the poetic possibilities of a Caribbean English. Gerardo Maloney’s poem “En 1920,” written in Panama in 1980, majestically enthrones a twentieth-century *cimarrón* who arose from the Panama Canal, that most peculiar version of the plantation:

Preston Stoute  
 Maestro barbadiense y dirigente de la gesta  
 (Preston Stoute  
 Barbadian schoolteacher and leader of action.)

His name pronounced for the first time at the center of this praise song, or *canción de gesta* in the Hispanic tradition, signals his central role in the labor action effected by West Indian workers on the Panama Canal in 1920. Maloney the griot, like Guillén, is conscious of his duty as a maker of heroes for his people, and he expresses his vision in the very last lines of the poem:

Estas al igual que muchas otras cosas  
 son pasajes de nuestra historia  
 casi jamás contadas.<sup>30</sup>

(These and many other things as well  
 are passages in our history  
 that are almost never told.)

29. Césaire, *Cabier d’un retour*, 66. James, *Black Jacobins*, 391–418.

30. Maloney, *Juega vivo*, 19, 21. For more on this topic, see my *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin: A New Hispanic Literature*, esp. 28.

Another contemporary West Indian Panamanian writer, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, has as his clear objective—patently so—the same exalting of forgotten heroes, the recounting of passages “casi jamás contadas” of his nation’s historical record. Thus his novel *Chombo* functions as a roll call of the heroic masses who resisted the present-day Panamanian plantation system.

The twentieth-century treatment of the *cimarrón* in both Maloney and Wilson, as was seen earlier in the case of Menéndez’s atheistic Marxism, has been affected by contemporary European secularism, in marked contrast to the fundamentally religious orientation of mainstream Caribbean *cimarronaje*. It is interesting that Guillén reverts almost instinctively to this religious orientation and endows his poetic persona with certain syncretic qualities that also constitute the heroic symbols created by Quince Duncan, the contemporary Costa Rican novelist.

Hero-making is, a priori, a basic function of contemporary popular scribal Caribbean poets, and one of the most impressive demonstrations of this function is the poem “Nanny” by the brilliant young Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison. The poem is included in her second book of poetry, *I Am Becoming My Mother*. “Nanny” presents a powerful artistic development—the legendary historical heroine is further elevated by Goodison’s idea that Nanny, the maroon, demonstrated such extraordinary qualities in her native land that she was deliberately sent into captivity so she could get to the New World and organize her sisters and brothers against the barbaric system. The short poem ends with the empowering view of a woman who proclaims her mission before the bar of history and promises that when “sorrow obscures the skies,” other women like her will rise up.<sup>31</sup> Like Jesús Menéndez, Nanny the heroine conquers physical death through the transcendence of her heroism.



Popular literature in the Caribbean in its pristine state, as I consistently contend, is an oral expression; only recently has it attained the scribal level. Whereas in my two preceding chapters I focused specifically on the historical and anthropological links between original oral and derived scribal expressions, a similar focus is not so readily developed in this present chapter, which treats of a literary topic. There exists nothing but a very tentative and limited body of literary criticism relating to oral expressions.<sup>32</sup> The case for

31. Lorna Goodison, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, 45.

32. For example, see Warner, *Kaiso!*, and Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural en el vallenato*.

the link between oral and scribal expressions of heroism has to be developed a priori, based on arguments developed a posteriori in the other chapters of this book.

It can be said, then (to reiterate my contention in the opening paragraph of this chapter), that Nicolás Guillén is demonstrably not only a creator of heroes but a flesh-and-blood hero in his own right. In this regard his links with the oral poets are incontrovertible. He is the scribal literary version of Celia Cruz, Beny Moré, Bob Marley, the Mighty Sparrow, and Black Stalin, among many others. Nicolás Guillén the real person, the real as well as the “implied” author, is a contemporary Caribbean hero who sings praise songs to his peers.

## The *Mujer Nueva*

Caribbean people do know about love, of this one can be certain. They are moved by the great love stories of humanity, both the archetypal and the contemporary. According to V. S. Naipaul, the anonymous kaisonian's comments on the saga of King Edward became part of the daily linguistic currency of ordinary Trinidadians: "Is love, love, love, alone / That cause King Edward to leave the throne."<sup>1</sup>

However, Caribbean literature is generally held to be weak in love poetry. In an important "Conversación con Nicolás Guillén," one of the interviewers, Ciro Bianchi Ross, frankly broached this question: "Along with the irony and satire, there is in your poetry an extraordinary capacity for tenderness. However, the universal theme of love does not appear until *El son entero*, and then it fully manifests itself in *Poemas de amor*. Why this absence of love until so late?" Bianchi Ross's question makes manifest all the misconceptions and, indeed, prejudices that critics can, and generally do, entertain on this subject. Guillén's reply is masterful and provides the key to a proper understanding of the Caribbean sensibility concerning the relationship between the sexes.<sup>2</sup>

The expression *absence of love* does not seem to me to be appropriate. What we have is best seen as a kind of prudishness, a prudishness about

1. Quoted in Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, 105.

2. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 52. Even Caribbean commentators have misunderstood, at times grossly, this aspect of their culture, falling prey to the prejudices of the colonizer. One Caribbean critic, a friend of mine, once told me in all earnestness during a serious discussion of the issue that Caribbean poets did not create love poetry because of their laziness.

expressing love in public. Love poetry interests a small number of readers, among whom must be included the protagonists of the poems, and very few others. Well, as far as I am concerned, it can't be said that love came overly late to my poetry. A poem that I consider representative, a romantic poem, was written in 1919 or 1920: "La balada azul." From that period there is a composition in four sonnets, "Rosas de elegía." There are many more, not only from that time, but from other periods immediately following. So that, in fact, the present-day poems that you consider late arrivals indeed have deep roots. On the other hand, I think that those who *sing* most about love, and talk most about it, are those who *practice* it the least.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, the interviewer did not pursue the line of questioning.

The image or symbol of the *mujer nueva* (new woman), created by Guillén and employed throughout his poetic career, gives physical form to the principles espoused in this declaration. The image springs from a sensibility shared by many, if not most, Caribbean people and is central to Guillén's art, appearing for the first time with this precise label in the poem "Mujer nueva," in his pivotal anthology *Sóngoro cosongo*. In order to appreciate fully the significance of this poem, it is first necessary, however, to review the aesthetic tradition on which it is built.



One of the critics who helped prepare the ground for the growth of Afro-Hispanic literature as an academic area, Rosa E. Valdés-Cruz, sees the humanization of nature as the most original feature of Luis Palés Matos's "black poetry." However, in the view of Léopold Sédar Senghor, one of the founders of Négritude, this so-called original feature in Palés Matos is a commonplace in African aesthetics. He asserts, "all of Mother Nature is animated with a human presence. She is humanized in the etymological and contemporary sense of the term. Not just animals and natural phenomena—the rain, the wind, thunder, mountains, rivers—but even trees and pebbles take on human form." It is not surprising, then, that the Trinidadian critic (and author of the first, and still the leading, work on the Anglophone Caribbean novel) Kenneth Ramchand claims, "Personification of landscape is a characteristic trick of West Indian writers dealing with Africa."<sup>4</sup>

From the very beginning of his poetic production, Guillén manifested this tendency toward humanization, or what might be termed

3. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 52.

4. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 136. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 24–25. Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, 153.

an artistic animism. The brief poem “Sol de lluvia” of the Capitulation phase, for example, presents the image of a drunken sun staggering to his feet in the street.<sup>5</sup> Although the absurd irreverence smacks of the *poètes maudits* (and Lautréamont in particular), there are also clear connections with basic trends in African aesthetics. In “Chévere” from *Sóngoro cosongo* (of the Revitalization phase, a time of clamorous rediscovery of African roots), it is the moon’s turn to take on flesh—flesh that is, in fact, susceptible to the razor of the thug and probable pimp, Chévere: “Pica tajadas de luna” (He cuts slices of the moon) (1:125). In “Palabras en el Trópico” (Words in the Tropics)—the important poetic statement opening *West Indies, Ltd*—many images are informed by the principle of animism or humanization. The poet speaks of “la piel de los árboles” (the skin of the trees); “el corazón de las selvas / y la carne de los ríos” (the heart of the forests / and the flesh of the rivers); and “retozando en las aguas con mis Antillas desnudas, / yo te saludo, Trópico” (frolicking in the waters with my naked Antilles, / I salute you, O Tropic) (1:135–36). Whereas the last image appears to be directly inspired by Palés Matos (especially his “Mulata Antilla” [Brown-skinned Antille]), the first two could have come directly from Aimé Césaire’s famous *Cahier*. This aesthetic principle constitutes the basis of Guillén’s book *El gran zoo*, from the poet’s clearly post-revolutionary and probably post-Radicalization period.

Going one step further than just seeing the world as flesh and blood, according to Janheinz Jahn, African and neo-African poets actually identify man with the universe. The universe becomes man and man becomes the universe. The poem that opens *Sóngoro cosongo*, “Llegada,” is posited artistically on the sense of the black man’s special closeness to and identity with nature. The first stanza contains the image “y un sol enérgico nos amanece entre las venas” (and an energetic sun rises in our veins) (1:115). The second strophe echoes Langston Hughes’s famous “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” with the image “Sabemos donde nacen las aguas” (We know where the waters are born) (1:115).

Of all natural phenomena, in the African and neo-African worldview, trees are the most often identified with humans. In her well-known study of the religious and magical folklore of African-ancestored Cubans, the Cuban researcher Lydia Cabrera indicates,

5. I use the term *animism* as a matter of convenience. I repudiate outright all the flawed, hopelessly Eurocentric, anthropological and theological analyses on which the term is usually based. See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the terms *Capitulation*, *Revitalization*, and *Radicalization*, which are taken from Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral.

"When a tree is not exactly the dwelling place or *tronco* of a *divinidad* it at least possesses the powers conferred on it by the *divinidad* to whom it belongs." Jahn asserts that, in the Bantu philosophical system, although trees pertain to the class of things, *kintu*, they constitute a very special kind of *kintu*. They have, indeed, a special affinity with the *muntu* (human) class because of their special use in liturgical activities: "In many Bantu languages, therefore, trees belong, linguistically speaking, in the *Muntu* class."<sup>6</sup>

Guillén's poems "Ebano real" (Royal ebony) and "Ácana" (Cuban redwood) from *El son entero* take on special significance, in the light of these considerations. Even though they were written in the 1940s, more than a decade after the poet had advanced beyond the Revitalization phase, they resonate with the peculiar culture of Afro-Cubans. "Ebano real" begins:

Te vi al pasar, una tarde,  
 ébano, y te saludé;  
 duro entre todos los troncos,  
 duro entre todos los troncos,  
 tu corazón recordé.

Arará, cuévano,  
 arará sabalú.  
 (1:229)

(I saw you as I passed by, one afternoon,  
 ebony, and I greeted you;  
 the hardest of all *troncos*,  
 the hardest of all *troncos*,  
 I remembered your heart.

Arará, cuévano  
 arará sabalú.)

*Tronco* is difficult to translate, being at the same time the dwelling of a divinity, the trunk of a tree, the origin of a family, and more. However, much of the powerful symbolism of the poem is obvious even to the uninitiated. Readers familiar with the culture of African-ancestored peoples from the Caribbean will feel a special vibration to the emotions evoked by the image "ébano real" when they recall Césaire's clamorously ironic challenge, which begins with a saluta-

6. Lydia Cabrera, *El monte: Notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y del pueblo de Cuba*, 16. Jahn, *Muntu*, 102.

tion to the great African tree the *kailcedrat*, and which is wrung out at the very heart of the *Cabier*:

*Eia* for the royal *Kailcedrat*!  
*Eia* for those who invented nothing  
 for those who have never discovered  
 for those who have never conquered.<sup>7</sup>

Guillén's "Ebano real" is written in the popular octosyllabic form. Like the *son* poems, it has a refrain, which at first sight might appear to be merely another *jitanjáfora*. However, the critic Adriana Tous explains, "the words *arará* and *sabalú* are of African origin, whereas *cuévano* is a *jitanjáfora*. *Arará* is the name of an African region and a tribe whose ancient capital city was *Savalú*."<sup>8</sup> The poem is, in fact, a conversation between the persona and the tree. There is a certain levity introduced by the play between the persona's needs—for example, "Ebano real, yo quiero un barco" (Royal ebony, I need a boat)—and the tree's request "espérate a que me muera" (wait until I die). However, the poem echoes an eighteenth-century oral expression cited by Valdés-Cruz as an example of the liturgical songs of enslaved Afro-Cubans, a song entitled "Rezo de mayombero" (Priest's prayer), which is simply a series of entreaties made to various trees by the priest (*mayombero*) of a traditional African religion.<sup>9</sup> This song also contains words in one of the African languages still spoken by Cubans.

The *ácana* like the *ébano* is a tree found in Cuba, of which the wood is enduring and valuable. The term *ácana* is of African origin and is cited as such by Fernando Ortiz.<sup>10</sup> Guillén's salute to the "Ácana" begins:

Allá dentro, en el monte,  
 donde la luz acaba,  
 allá en el monte adentro,  
 ácana.

(1:254)

(Out there, in the bush,  
 where the light runs out,  
 out there deep in the bush,  
*ácana*.)

The term *monte*, meaning "forest," or "mountains," or simply

7. Césaire, *Cabier d'un retour*, 116.

8. Adriana Tous, *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén*, 125.

9. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 83.

10. Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Nuevo catauro de cubanismo*, 35.

“bush,” is important in the popular culture of Afro-Cubans (it is the very title of Lydia Cabrera’s book), for it is there that man makes his vital contacts with nature, the spirits, and the supernatural in general. The poet uses the rich rhythmic qualities of the word *ácana* to their fullest effect, and the poem is called a *son*.



A high point of the humanization process is reached when, in the full flush of the Afro-Cubanism of his Revitalization stage, Guillén identified the beauty of the black woman with the splendors of nature. The poet’s sentiments are forcefully expressed: the black woman is the earth mother, mysterious and alluring in her beauty. The poem “Mujer nueva” reads:

Con el círculo ecuatorial  
ceñido a la cintura como a un pequeño mundo,  
la negra, mujer nueva,  
avanza en su ligera bata de serpiente.

Coronada de palmas  
como una diosa recién llegada,  
ella trae la palabra inédita,  
el anca fuerte,  
la voz, el diente, la mañana y el salto.

Chorro de sangre joven  
bajo un pedazo de piel fresca,  
y el pie incansable  
para la pista profunda del tambor.

(1:120-21)

(With the circle of the equator around her waist  
like a belt around some small universe,  
the black woman, a new woman,  
steps forth in her light serpent smock.

Crowned with palms  
like a newly arrived goddess,  
she brings the unpublished word,  
her strong hip,  
her voice, her teeth, the morning, and the leap.

A spurt of young blood  
under a bit of fresh skin,  
and her indefatigable feet  
made for the drum’s deep dance rhythm.)

These images are evocative, not provocative like the images of the Afro-Antillean poets, but Guillén clearly did feel some influence of the Afro-Antillean school. His *mujer nueva* is a good dancer, for example, just like José Z. Tallet's *negra* Tomasa, of the poem "La rumba," who is put through her paces in her steamy-nightclub-style dancing with the *negro* José Encarnación. Tallet has them execute the following step:

Ella mueve una nalga, ella mueve la otra,  
él se estira, se encoge, dispara la grupa<sup>11</sup>

(She moves one buttock, she moves the other,  
he stretches, pulls back, shoots out his flank.)

Tallet's poem is derived from the liturgical representation of the confrontation between Shango and one of his wives, Oshun.<sup>12</sup> The poem is also a realistic description of the rumba dance, which, in this case, climaxes with the erotic coupling of the male and female:

Al suelo se viene la niña Tomasa,  
al suelo se viene José Encarnación;  
allí se revuelcan con mil contorsiones,  
se les sube el santo, se rompió el bongó,  
se acabó la rumba, ¡con-con-co-mabó!  
¡Pa-ca, Pa-ca, Pa-ca, Pa-ca!  
¡Pam! ¡Pam! ¡Pam!<sup>13</sup>

(Niña Tomasa falls down to the ground,  
José Encarnación falls down too;  
they twist and turn in a thousand contortions,  
they catch the power, the bongo breaks loose,  
the rumba is over, con-con-co-mabó!  
Pa-ca, Pa-ca, Pa-ca, Pa-ca!  
Pam! Pam! Pam!)

Tallet's poem is probably one of the most lurid of those still published in anthologies of the Afro-Antillean school. Its most representative feature is perhaps the *jitanjáfora*, used here to provide some closure. However, the device rings through as trite, a silly cliché stuck in at the end in lieu of a finale.

The only African-ancestored Cubans whose works are published in anthologies of so-called Afro-Antillean poetry are Guillén, of course, along with Regino Pedroso and Marcelino Arozarena. Aro-

11. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 94.

12. See Jahn, *Muntu*, 82.

13. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide*, 96.

zarena's best-known poems bear as titles the names of two black women of the same stripe as Tallet's Tomasa: "Caridá" and "Amalia." In fact, "Amalia" is a poem even more boldly erotic than Tallet's "La rumba," but its sexual references are veiled in a symbolic slang language that is generally inaccessible to the non-Cuban, and indeed nonspecialist, reader. Even so, it is not normally included in anthologies.

Whether their portraits were explicitly erotic or not, all the poets of this school painted the black woman in animal terms. Consequently, the terms *grupa* and *anca*, which normally refer to the hindquarters of animals, were used (with curious irony) as polite metonyms for what they saw artistically as the most salient feature of this new woman, that is, her fascinating steatopygia. Guillén uses one of these characteristic images, "el anca fuerte." The Guillén poem also contains inescapable mention of "la cintura" (waist), an area of the black woman's body that the poets of the Afro-Antillean school particularly admired and focused on, for its integral anatomical relationship to the buttocks. However, Guillén can draw on the intense evocative charge contained in these images without descending to the clichéd expressions of his peers. In fact, he builds on their exploitation of her sensuality to give his *mujer nueva* a "sort of telluric mysticism," to use G. R. Coulthard's term, a new depth that is entirely consistent with negritude.<sup>14</sup>

The woman, for example, from the earliest African civilization has been identified with the serpent. Just as the serpent coils around the tree, itself a symbol of life, the woman encloses new life in her womb.<sup>15</sup> Guillén may not have been conscious of the profound antiquity and resonance of the connection between the African woman and the serpent. However, this resonance would obviously be important to those Cubans who are still securely rooted in their African culture. On a more superficial level, a sensuous, sinuous dancing woman easily invites the comparison with a serpent. And even if this was all the poet intended at the conscious level, it is certainly legitimate for a critic to evoke the immense artistic wealth that lies hidden beneath the surface, which is easily accessible once real African connections are made.

In the same book, *Sóngoro cosongo*, Guillén included two madrigals in which he further sings the praises of this new woman. The first "Madrigal" appeared for the first time along with "Mujer nueva" (originally called "Mujer negra") in the section called "La

14. Coulthard, *Race and Colour*, 60.

15. A serpent-headed goddess guarded the throne of Osiris, according to Wallis Budge, *Osiris*, 1:43.

Marcha de una Raza” (The march of a race) of the paper *El Mundo* on March 29, 1931 (1:488–89). It reads:

De tus manos gotean  
las uñas, en un manojo de diez uvas moradas.

Piel,  
carne de tronco quemado,  
que cuando naufraga en el espejo, ahúma  
las algas tímidas del fondo.

(1:121)

(On your hands the beads  
of your nails are like ten black grapes.

Your skin,  
the flesh of the burned tree trunk,  
which sinks into the mirror as into a sea,  
and darkens the timid algae below.)

Obviously modeled on haiku poems of the vanguardist period in Spanish American letters, the rhythm is not that of the typical *son*. The image in the first stanza is built on two important traditions in Caribbean culture. First, the new woman is associated with water, one of the prime elements of the universe and, more significantly, the element of Yemaya, Oya, and Oshun, the wives of Shango, all water spirits. The theme of this association is carried into the second stanza and is the basis of the poem’s final symbolic image. Second, the association between fruit and the new woman was clearly established by the nineteenth-century Haitian poets who, according to Coulthard, first wrote the native Caribbean persona into the literature of the region.<sup>16</sup> Following the lines of my earlier discussion of the humanization of nature, the link between the black woman and the *tronco* is a fundamental one.

The second “Madrigal” was actually composed before the first one and was included in the 1947 collection *El son entero*, but it “did not figure in the 1931 edition” (1:489). It reaffirms the basic image:

Tu vientre sabe más que tu cabeza  
y tanto como tus muslos.  
Esa  
es la fuerte gracia negra  
de tu cuerpo desnudo.

16. Coulthard, *Race and Colour*, 88.

Signo de selva el tuyo,  
 con tus collares rojos,  
 tus brazaletes de oro curvo,  
 y ese caimán oscuro  
 nadando en el Zambeze de tus ojos.

(1:122)

(Your belly knows more than your head  
 and as much as your thighs.

That  
 is the strong black elegance  
 of your naked body.

Yours is the sign of the jungle,  
 with your red necklace,  
 your bracelets of curved gold,  
 and that dark alligator  
 swimming in the Zambezi of your eyes.)

Although the images are hauntingly symbolic, the sense is quite clear. This is the typical persona of Afro-Antillean verses, a sensual, skilled, black, dancing female, more body than mind—her belly and thighs in particular prevailing over her head. Her naked body, however, evokes primarily a “fuerte gracia negra,” that is, strength and racial beauty rather than naked lust. The second stanza confirms the transcendence of her image, the “telluric mysticism.” She is identified with the jungle forest on the basis of the repeated association between the *muntu* and trees. She is clearly an exotic earth mother, the universe itself, whose eyes are rivers, just as in the original *mujer nueva* poem her waist was girded by the equator.

In keeping with the approach I am outlining here, it is the palm tree, so typical of the tropics, that seems to be the most apt symbol of the new woman’s slender gracefulness. Claude McKay used the symbol magnificently in “The Harlem Dancer,” proclaiming, “To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm.”<sup>17</sup> Guillén is quite aware of this possibility, as he shows in his “Palma sola” (Solitary palm) from *El son entero*. This is a *son* poem first published in 1945 and composed of octosyllabic lines alternating with four-syllable lines in *pie quebrado*, except for the last line, which is an effective, rounding-off, two-syllable line, “palma.” This final utterance carries the full force of the emotional charge that has built up in the poem. All by itself as the very last line, this is more than a mere image; it stands tantamount to a poem. Indeed the stanza that

17. Claude McKay, *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*, 61.

immediately precedes this utterance paints an image of the palm that comes close to McKay's:

La palma sola soñando,  
 palma sola,  
 que va libre por el viento,  
 libre y sola,  
 suelta de raíz y tierra,  
 suelta y sola;  
 cazadora de las nubes,  
 palma sola,  
 palma sola,  
 palma.

(1:248)

(The solitary palm dreaming,  
 the solitary palm,  
 moves freely in the wind,  
 free and solitary,  
 unencumbered by roots and earth,  
 unencumbered and free;  
 huntress of clouds,  
 the solitary palm,  
 the solitary palm,  
 the palm.)

Notwithstanding the aesthetic achievement this poem undoubtedly represents, it is the *caña*, and not the *palma*, that Guillén consistently chooses as the most apt symbol for the beauty of his *mujer nueva*. This preference is confirmed in another "Madrigal," this time from *West Indies, Ltd.* It reads:

Sencilla y vertical,  
 como una caña en el cañaveral.  
 Oh retadora del furor  
 genital:  
 tu andar fabrica para el espasmo gritador  
 espuma equina entre tus muslos de metal.

(1:140)

(Simple and vertical  
 like the sugarcane in the cane field.  
 Oh challenger of genital  
 fury:  
 as you walk you generate a spasmodic shriek  
 and equine foam between your metal thighs.)

For all the convoluted symbolic language, this brief poem is blatantly erotic and shows a characteristic combination of opposites, directness and indirectness, in the area of eroticism. It is interesting that the same elements of flexibility and strength—the sugarcane plant and metal—are employed to portray beauty in one of Guillén's later *Poemas de amor*, "Ana María," a love poem that was written in Bucharest in 1962. The geographical location of its composition and the fleeting reference to her hair, "la trenza que te cae" (your hanging tress) (2:205), give the impression that the persona is nonblack; however, Ana María is strong in the same way the *mujer nueva* is, with "un cuerpo metálico" (2:206).

The poem that immediately follows "Palma sola" in *El son entero* is "Agua del recuerdo" (Water of memory), which tells of the poet's fleeting encounter with a "mulata de oro" (golden mulatto woman) who arouses his intense interest. This interest is ultimately frustrated, as he is left with just a haunting memory of what is lost forever, poignantly expressed in the first two lines of the final verse:

Nada sé, nada se sabe,  
ni nada sabré jamás,  
(1:249)

(I know nothing, nothing is known,  
nor will I ever know anything.)

The power of the poem hinges on the successful identification established between the woman and the *caña*, in the second and third verses:

Pasó una mulata de oro,  
y yo la miré al pasar;  
moño de seda en la nuca,  
bata de cristal,  
niña de espalda reciente,  
tacón de reciente andar.

Caña  
(febril le dije en mí mismo),  
caña  
temblando sobre el abismo,  
¿quién te empujará?  
¿Qué cortador con su mocha  
te cortará?  
¿Qué ingenio con su trapiche  
te molerá?

(1:248-49)

(A golden mulatto woman passed by,  
and I looked at her as she passed;  
a silk tassel on the nape of her neck,  
a smock of crystal,  
a girl with brand new shoulders,  
and brand new heels.

Sugarcane

[I called to her feverishly within myself]

sugarcane

trembling on the abyss,

who will push you over?

What cutter with his machete

will cut you down?

What factory will grind you

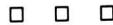
in its press?)

On the surface level the poem refers, of course, merely to the central agricultural and socioeconomic reality of the islands, but again, the poet has made clever use of the double entendre to describe the harvesting of a nubile islander's golden charms. The same image occurs in another poem, "El negro mar" (The black sea), of the same collection: "—Ay, mi mulata de oro fino" (—Ay, my mulatto woman of fine gold) (1:253). The connection is not accidental, then, but must indicate that Guillén's poetic mind equated the woman with the slender, restless sugarcane plant. His imaginative phantasma has built a coherent set of these metaphors. The case is strengthened if one considers that gold is the color of the canes ripened in the sun to their full, succulent, fruitful maturity.

In the poem "Canta el sinsonte en el Turquino" from *Tengo*, Guillén bursts into song in praise of Fidel Castro and his revolution, which is seen in real terms. The second part of the poem names and greets individually all the good things the revolution supposedly accomplished. This part of the work begins and ends with a significant "Buenos días, Fidel" (Good morning, Fidel). Then one of the lines of triumphant salutation is precisely "Buenos días, altas muchachas como castas cañas" (Good morning, tall girls like chaste sugarcanes) (2:103). This line could only spring from the continuing phantasma of a poetic imagination that equates woman with *caña*.

So, Nicolás Guillén has developed a complex set of metaphors to portray feminine beauty, a set of metaphors that includes the Caribbean's agricultural and socioeconomic realities. In an earlier article on *mulatez* and the *mujer nueva* I advanced the argument that he developed this corpus of metaphors as a direct consequence of his

heightened consciousness of being black. After the success of the revolution, when considerations of race and class became supposedly irrelevant to Cuban society, the poet returned to singing the beauty of the nonblack female. However it is clear that the image of the black *mujer nueva* survives intact all of the political vicissitudes that affected his art. When he returned to the nonblack female poetic personae that once had exclusively peopled his universe, he remained true to his essential vision of the *mujer nueva*. What resulted was not the substitution of a white female persona for the black *mujer nueva*. Instead he tried to universalize the image of the new black woman, using most frequently and consistently the corpus of metaphors he had developed as a significant element of his poetry. (In fact it is difficult, if not impossible, to find consistent or systematic use in his poetry of any other set of metaphors to describe the female persona.) The fact that these metaphors are African inspired (through their equation of the natural and human worlds) substantiates Guillén's assertion that the only true Cuban art—and for this very reason, the best—is that which incorporates African cultural elements.<sup>18</sup>



As the poet himself asserted in the interview cited earlier, he was no Johnny-come-lately to the field of love poetry, especially if, as is traditionally the case, this was taken to include the praise song to feminine beauty. What was special about Guillén was his eminently practical approach to the theme, his concentration on the practicalities of love. In fact, he pointedly affirmed that love is more appropriately practiced than sung and that the inherent selfishness of love poetry was, in fact, a shortcoming. This approach militates against those maudlin expressions of puppy-love that are frequently seen as the most appropriate expressions of the personal feelings involved in the relationship between the sexes. My earlier article contended that, in Guillén's art, erotic love (which, by his own declaration, was always a significant item on his vital agenda) was constantly preempted on the aesthetic plane by the more transcendental theme of the selfless love of humanity.

This preempting of erotic love is a consequence of the poet's clearly articulated adherence to the principle that beauty and function are inseparable. Love is not sung, it is practiced; and when sung, it is put in its proper context. Guillén's love is never an idiosyncratic, narrowly focused expression but, rather, an integral part of the greater love that inspires human coexistence and ensures

18. This passage is taken in part from my "Mulatez," 387.

the survival of the species. Jahn claims that this approach to love poetry in particular, and to art in general, is characteristically African:

In African poetry . . . expression is always in the service of the content; it is never a question of expressing *oneself*, but of expressing *something*, and, indeed, with a view to the results, for African poetry exists as *function*. Nor is the African poet ever concerned with his inner nature, with *his* individuality. . . . The African poet does not express *his* relation to nature, but places "Nature" (Kintu) at his service, rouses it into life, steers and manipulates it. In the love poem he does not express *his* love, but love as such, a force in which he shares. The love poem is more than conversation, courtship, play: it is Nommo, word seed in the most concrete sense. . . . "For in the last analysis every artistic manifestation is collective, created for all and shared by all," writes Senghor. "Because they are functional and collective, Negro-African literature and art are committed. They commit the person, and not merely the individual."<sup>19</sup>

For all its narrowly technical jargon, Jahn's analysis is consistent with Guillén's words of explanation, as well as with the spirit behind his artistic expression. The balance between function and beauty accounts for the practicality that clearly prevails in Guillén's treatment of the relationship between the sexes. This consideration might help his readers appreciate certain aspects of the love theme that can appear disturbing, at first sight, when measured by the inappropriate yardstick of a foreign sensibility.

The first female personae to appear after the poet's awakening to the Revitalization phase are those of the original *son* poems. These personae are taken directly from the daily lives of urban African-ancestored Cubans, and they correspond to the characters of the "yard" novel, which, in "the late 1920s and early 1930s" according to Kenneth Ramchand, was being developed by an important group of young writers from Trinidad and Tobago: C. L. R. James, Albert Gomes, Alfred Mendes, and Carlton Comma. This group, in Ramchand's view, contributed to the "decisive establishment of social realism in the West Indian novel. . . . In the literature of the yard, sex and an uninhibited approach by the writers are basic ingredients."<sup>20</sup>

Caridá, the female companion of the *negro bembón*, is keeping her man: "Caridá te mantiene" (1:103). He is content to live on her earnings, which are probably derived from prostitution. The "Mulata" of Guillén's second *son* poem sees all her worth residing in the

19. Jahn, *Muntu*, 148-49.

20. Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, 63, 65.

accident of her racial composition. She is obviously at home in the yard situation, she knows how to strut her stuff:

Tanto tren con tu cuerpo,  
tanto tren;

(1:104)

(So much style with your body,  
so much style.)

The *negra* of “Si tú supiera...,” the third *son*, is intimate with at least two men and has the same approach to the relationship between material possessions and romantic love as that of the female persona in “Búcate plata” (Get some money), the sixth *son*. They both subscribe to the principle enunciated by the Mighty Sparrow’s Monica—namely, “no money, no love.”<sup>21</sup> The title of the sixth *son* is an unequivocal declaration, “Get some money,” that becomes the refrain of the composition. In “Si tú supiera...” the male persona complains:

A é tú le hará como a mí,  
que cuando no tube plata  
te corrite de bachata,  
sin acoddadte de mí.

(1:105)

(Will you do him like you did me,  
when my money done  
you take off and run,  
and forget 'bout me.)

The same kind of preoccupation with material things is imputed to the female personae of “Sigue...” and “Hay que tené boluntá,” the fourth and fifth *son* poems. In the fourth, the female persona causes the poet to counsel:

Acuéddate que ella e mala,  
sigue.

(1:106)

(Remember that she’s a bad woman,  
keep on walking.)

In the fifth, the male interlocutor attempts to forestall the action of the female of “Si tú supiera...” with his repeated plea to “Keep on keeping on.”

21. See Warner, *Kaiso!*, 102.

The ideal woman of this socioeconomic milieu is presented in "Mi chiquita" (My chick), the seventh *son*, but she is very much an exception. In fact she is unique, being the only local woman who is not shown to be explicitly venal. To confirm the uncommon nature of her qualities, these are expressly contrasted with what might be considered the norm:

Ella laba, plancha, cose,  
y sobre to, caballero,  
¡cómo cosina!

Si la bienen a bucá  
pa bailá,  
pa comé,  
ella me tiene que llebá,  
o traé.

(1:109)

(She does wash, iron, sew,  
and I telling you, man,  
she's a boss cook!

If they come to look for she  
to go dance,  
to go restaurant,  
she does always take me too,  
every time.)

This ideal woman is not only an accomplished housekeeper, she is also loyal—not like the others who would run off to party with other men at the slightest sign of reversal in her mate's economic fortune. Nor is she the type who would keep a "sweet man" like the *negro bembón*. The situation is approaching perfect conjugal bliss.

However, there is a patent ordinariness or functionality in this ideal romantic relationship. The same type of practicality accounts for the disturbing venality and corruption of the other female personae; it springs from the poet's firm grounding in reality and his commitment to effecting social change. The ideal woman is no longer a heroine taken from books, a woman from far-off lands, usually white, fashioned after the tastes of a different culture, a *mujer de ensueño* or dream-woman. Guillén himself characterized this persona as that of his work "La balada azul," a love song that could have come directly from the pen of Rubén Darío, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, or any European writer in the romantic tradition.

□ □ □

Upon attaining his artistic majority, Guillén expressly repudiated

this type of love song. In fact, the private love that is of interest only to the parties involved—two only in the best of conditions—is so foreign to his essential artistic spirit that he all but excluded any song to the ideal woman of his real life, his wife. There appears to be just one poem explicitly dedicated to her, namely, “Rosa tú, melancólica” (Rosa of my melancholy) from *El son entero*. Angel Augier asserts that this work was “dedicated by the poet to his wife Rosa Portillo and was written in Caracas in 1946” (1:537). In the tradition of “La balada azul” and “Rosas de elegía” (Roses of elegy), it sings of an individual’s nostalgia for his absent loved one.

The most intense, traditional expressions of love are usually those describing the love of the ideal. This intangible, nonphysical, ultimately unattainable element is perfectly portrayed in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s wistful, ethereal *Rimas* for example, and it is explicitly conjured up in his *rima* entitled simply “XI”:

“Yo soy ardiente, yo soy morena,  
yo soy el símbolo de la pasión;  
de ansia de goces mi alma está llena.  
¿A mí me buscas?” “No es a ti, no.”

“Mi frente es pálida; mis trenzas, de oro;  
puedo brindarte dichas sin fin;  
yo de ternura guardo un tesoro.  
¿A mí me llamas?” “No; no es a ti.”

“Yo soy un sueño, un imposible,  
vano fantasma de niebla y luz;  
soy incorpórea, soy intangible;  
no puedo amarte.” “¡Oh, ven; ven tú!”<sup>22</sup>

(“I am ardent, I am brunette,  
I am the symbol of passion;  
my soul yearns deeply for pleasure.  
Am I the one you seek?” “No, it’s not you.”

“My forehead is pale; my locks, of gold;  
I can offer you joys untold;  
I have in me a treasure of tenderness.  
Am I the one you call?” “No, it’s not you.”

“I am a mere dream, an impossible,  
vain illusion of mist and light;  
I am incorporeal, I am intangible;  
I cannot love you.” “Oh come, you, come!”)

22. Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, *Rimas, leyendas y narraciones*, 8.

When offered classic, stereotypical, female images representing the allure of erotic love, the Becquerian persona opts for the “amor imposible,” the platonic ideal of the medieval courtly love cycle. This choice is representative of the romantic attitude and is viewed by Western poets as almost a condition, *sine qua non*, for the most intense expression of love poetry.

Certainly, this was the view Guillén assumed as basic when, in the interview cited earlier, he took his works “La balada azul” and “Rosas de elegía” as the epitomes of love poems. They both evoke the specter of impossible, and thus ultimately unconsummated, love. “Rosas de elegía,” first published in February 1921 when the poet had not yet completed his eighteenth year, consists of four sonnets dedicated to a cruelly indifferent, but deeply loved, woman. It ends with a typically romantic declaration in the final tercet of the final sonnet:

¡En vano esperarán mis ilusiones  
tus misereres y tus oraciones  
sobre la pena de sus agonías!

(1:6)

(In vain will my illusions await  
your misereres and your prayers  
for the agonies they suffer!)

“La balada azul,” published in April of the same year, presents the same teenage puppy-love, a romantic approach sanctioned by the great poets who were Guillén’s models. The poem finishes:

—Mi bien, yo siempre pedí  
ser blanca cruz en la tumba  
donde dormirás por fin,  
para estar, aun en la muerte,  
cerca, muy cerca de ti...

(1:50)

(—My all, I have always prayed  
to be a white cross on the tomb  
where you will finally be laid to rest,  
so as to be, even in death,  
close, very close to you.)

Even in this case, where love is in fact required, the poet chooses to focus on the most incorporeal aspect of the relationship, in lines of poetry that reflect none of the specifics of his particular culture.

Guillén evidently maintained the Becquerian, European, romantic ideal of love poetry even after the return to African roots sig-

naled by his *son* poems in 1930. Significantly, the only love poem explicitly dedicated to his real-life wife, Rosa, appears to adhere to this concept of love poetry. It was written during a time when she was absent, a period of intense nostalgia for the temporarily unrequited relationship. The title is indicative of the central theme, "Rosa tú, melancólica." Its final lines are:

Cierro entonces los ojos  
pero siempre te veo  
clavada allí, clavando  
tu mirada en mi pecho,  
larga mirada fija,  
como un puñal de sueño.  
(1:259)

(I close my eyes then,  
but I see you still  
fixed there, fixing  
your eyes on my breast,  
with a long, deep look,  
like a dagger in a dream.)

His flesh-and-blood mate has to be reduced to the quality of dream—to the impossible, vague phantasma, the incorporeal, intangible being of the Becquerian poem—before she can be the subject of a veritable love poem.



The Afrocentric approach to love, on the other hand, is one that, so to speak, demands the beef. Essentially practical, it sees no incompatibility between beauty and function and is thus antithetical to romanticism, the narrowly defined European literary movement; but this is not to say that it is *unromantic* in the fullest sense of the term. This Afrocentric approach to love characterizes the way in which the Colombian *vallenato* treats the relationship between the sexes. In fact, it is precisely in the theme of absent love that, according to the commentator Rito Llerena Villalobos, the *vallenato* most clearly manifests its practical orientation. He claims:

**Man's basic longing**, the inevitable loss of the other, the necessary condition for the emergence of desire, is verbalized in the form of the **love complaint**, expressing the pain felt for the loss. . . . However, in the texts of the song there are always employed **formulas** or **strategies** which we could term **balanced**. . . . By way of demonstration let us take the following lines from one of the *vallenato* classics, *La Maye*, by Rafael Escalona, in which the illustrious composer says to his loved one:

“What I do not want is to see you jealous  
 what I do not want is to see you cry  
 because the pain will kill you  
 and then I’ll have to look for another.”

What we are interested in pointing out is that although the pain and sorrow for the loss of the object of love find their symbolic expression in the song, there is no room for such feelings as melancholy, the homicidal urge that overcomes the individual who suffers the loss, making him or her feel worthless and inducing a strong need to broadcast his or her defects through laments, self-recrimination and complaints.<sup>23</sup>

Llerena Villalobos then cites another relevant classical *vallenato* entitled “La casa” (The home). The opening stanza presents the essential conflict: the persona, a man, complains that he will have to sell his home because everything in it reminds him of his absent mate. The song continues in the normal style, presenting more details of this central situation. He will have to sell the house quickly and for a very low price because the fickle woman, who gave him her hand and promised abiding love, has now fallen in love with another man and left him. In the next verse, he says:

But to God who is all powerful, I have prayed  
 that He will keep me calm in the face of the pain  
 and that he will surprise me one day with oblivion  
 and will change my disillusion into joy.

This positive approach to what could have been a bitter tragedy predominates, and this six-stanza song, which opened with such a potentially tremendous lament, now ends:

And I have to get me a girl  
 who will forget what has happened and can love me  
 who will understand that a ring is no longer necessary  
 that happiness is not found only in marriage.<sup>24</sup>

A more practical, “unromantic” approach to the tragedy would be hard to find. Yet this *vallenato* is considered, and clearly is, a love song for it deals with the relationship between the sexes.

Whereas it could be claimed that such matter-of-factness is not uncommon in the culture of down-to-earth peasants and common folk of any region, it is in this case inconsistent with the prevailing pattern. For one of the most characteristic traits of Hispanophone cultures of all epochs and of all classes has been the obsession with

23. Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural en el vallenato*, 123-24.

24. *Ibid.*, 124.

personal honor, *honra*, especially on the part of the macho. Many have been the women (and men) sacrificed for this cause, in the past and present literature of Spain and Spanish America. As Llerena Villalobos points out, even in such popular cultural manifestations as the Mexican *ranchera* song and the Argentinean tango, the inviolability of the male's personal honor is paramount, to be defended even to the point of homicide. In popular literature and art literature, as well as in real life, the stereotypical Mexican macho would quickly have resolved the problem faced by the persona in "La casa," with murderous recourse to his trusty *pistola*.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of Hispanophone culture, then, the *vallenato* treats with incredible equanimity the matter of the *mujer interesada* (mercenary woman), the type of female persona presented in Guillén's "Hay que tené boluntá," for example. Women like the Mighty Sparrow's Monica, who base their romantic relationships squarely on the principle of "no money, no love," appear frequently in the *vallenato*. According to Llerena Villalobos, although they are castigated for representing an antithetical cultural value, there is no question of any legal or physical sanction being applied. Their behavior is simply portrayed as morally and culturally unacceptable.

Laurence E. Prescott uncovers an analogous approach to the relationship between the sexes in the poetry of Candelario Obeso who, like Guillén, created a scribal literature from the popular literature of his region (the region from which the *vallenato* sprang). His work, of course, belongs entirely to the nineteenth century, the century of romanticism, but the predominating values in his poems are still the prevailing folk values. The love he presents is fashioned after the reality of his Colombian world; it is not an import from distant Europe.

The picaro trickster becomes clearly discernible in Obeso's presentation of the theme of love, and sober reflection shows this to be the essential factor accounting for the dramatic divergence between the *vallenato* approach to love and that of the general Hispanophone culture. The *vallenato* is imbued with an inherent folk cunning similar to that found in the scribal poetry of Obeso and of Guillén. Prescott asserts that, in Obeso's faithful representation of his personae, he presents love as an enterprise requiring all the skills

25. In fact, the Mexican *ranchera* songs appear to have a strong appeal to certain Colombians. My friend David Sánchez Juliao, a young Colombian writer and a native of Loricá (in the region from which the *vallenato* originated), has written a widely acclaimed novel, *Pero sigo siendo el rey* (But I'm still the king), based entirely on the spirit and lyrics of *rancheras*. It is a story soaked in blood, which has been spilled in uncompromising defense of the strictly defined honor of the male characters.

of the trickster: "Life for the boatman is quite difficult. It is a constant struggle: he fights not only to earn his daily bread but also to be successful in love and to maintain the stability and happiness of his home, so threatened by his absences. Thus, in order to win, and keep, the love of his woman, the male has to call into service the same intelligence and guiles he uses in the other fundamental activities of his life."<sup>26</sup>

The love song, in fact, becomes literally a "Diálogo picarejco" (Picaroon dialogue), the title of a poem by Obeso in which there is a thrust-and-parry encounter between a young man and a young woman. The young man tries to make his point through indirection and double entendre requiring a high degree of verbal virtuosity, while the young woman parries his verbal thrusts with a skill evincing an equally graceful way with words, a clarity of mind, and a strong sense of independence. This view of the contest between the sexes is central to the folk culture of African-ancestored people in the Americas; it is the approach of the blues, and certainly that of the kaiso. It is the approach enshrined in the *yuka* dance from which the rumba originates.<sup>27</sup> This view fosters equanimity in the face of the inevitable, the loss of the loved one either through death or infidelity. Perhaps it is in order to protect himself in advance that the male persona of an Obeso poem tends to be cynical about the constancy of his mate.

Prescott concludes that there are "two principal metaphors applied to the woman" in Obeso's folk-based poetry; she is both the *paloma* (dove) and the *gallina* (hen). Each metaphor in its own way shows an eminently practical approach to the theme of love. Prescott claims:

Besides serving as a term of endearment, this eminently poetic word [*palomita*] appears to encode the male's unspoken wish that his mate be like the female dove, that is to say, that she have the qualities which these birds symbolize: a constant, loyal, eternal love; fidelity; peace. . . .

On the other hand the actual amorous relationships between man and woman are less idyllic. . . . This idea is contained in the other metaphor which the boatman uses with respect to the woman: the hen. Contrary to the dove, a bird that suggests nobility, beauty and tenderness, the hen is an ordinary bird that is not distinguished by any particular fidelity to its mate. The image of the hen is more related to the practical, materialistic aspects of life than to the aesthetic and the spiritual.<sup>28</sup>

26. Prescott, *Candelario Obeso*, 108.

27. See Warner, *Kaiso!*, 99, for this view of the kaiso, and see Jahn, *Muntu*, 82, for the *yuka*.

28. Prescott, *Candelario Obeso*, 117.

Even though Prescott sees the two symbols as dichotomous, they actually both reflect an approach to art that is consistent with the traditional African worldview unifying the human sphere and the world of nature.

The relationship between the sexes is treated with equal matter-of-factness in the kaiso from Trinidad and Tobago. This directness, it may be argued, is a feature of most folk forms developed by peoples who have not succumbed to the hypocrisy and artificiality that are frequent consequences of advanced economic development. However, as I indicated earlier in the case of the *vallenato* versus the Mexican *ranchera* or the Argentinean tango, there are clearly defined differences within this common matter-of-factness. Thus, the practical, down-to-earth attitude of the kaiso is similar to that of the *vallenato*, the *son*, and the popular oral poetry on which Obeso's work is based, while it is markedly different from the attitude of the *ranchera* or the tango, for example.

In the kaiso, the male persona confronts his woman's infidelity with a most significant equilibrium, an equilibrium based on a subdued resignation, a dull sense of the inevitability of misfortune, and above all on the laughter inspired by the smartman. This attitude is best represented in the picaroon, philosophical, smartman approach of Sparrow's kaiso "No Money, No Love," wherein Monica, the female persona, is the epitome of "amor interesada" (mercenary love):

We can't love without money  
 We can't make love on hungry belly  
 Johnny, you'll be the only one I am dreaming of  
 You're my turtle dove, but no money, no love.<sup>29</sup>

Although it is generally assumed that the folksy directness of the kaiso makes for excessive smuttiness (an assumption that appears to underlie even Keith Warner's expert presentation of the art form in his book *Kaiso!*), it is clear that the reticence, artistic intellectualism, and indirectness that govern all African and neo-African literary expressions are central to the kaiso as well. Betraying what appears to be a bias against the intrinsic artistic merit of the kaiso, Warner in fact suggests that the brilliant verbal virtuosity of the folk artists' double entendres can be reduced to a mere "way around outright vulgarity or open embarrassment" before a public that is intolerant of "downright vulgar and lewd body movements" or any breach of the norms of decency. Warner cites several examples of double entendres used in kaiso to portray in as "matter-of-fact" a

29. Warner, *Kaiso!*, 102.

manner as possible the relationship between the sexes. The most brilliant examples are to be found in the wordplay of “the Mighty Gypsy’s ‘Gone for Cane’ and the Lord Shorty’s ‘A Man for Kim.’”<sup>30</sup>

□ □ □

The delicate balance between directness and indirectness is not always achieved, and obscenity prevails sometimes, even in consummate exponents of the art form. Guillén’s poem “Digo que no soy un hombre puro” is an example. Written late in his life, the poem was meant to cause shock waves. It is the work of an old picaro in an experimental phase, experimentation being now the only substitute for the youth of which Darío sang so poignantly: “Juventud, divino tesoro, / ¡ya te vas para no volver!”<sup>31</sup> The poem clearly runs counter to both the folk tradition and the general tone established in Guillén’s works, and it causes even more of a shock for this reason.

Experimental, daring, even disgusting forms of expression are, to say the least, not uncommon in contemporary Western literature, as products of what Somerset Maugham once wittily referred to as the urge to call a spade a bloody shovel. Despite the principle of refined indirection that is antithetical to this urge, the *kaiso*, and indeed other folk expressions in the Caribbean, descend to the prurient at times, and sometimes deliberately so. Instances of the *kaiso*’s crossing of the bounds of decency are cited in Warner’s work. According to Roger D. Abrahams’s analysis, these indiscretions are the appropriate province of the cressroads performers, the exponents of broad talk.

Even so, the cold, calculating, almost clinical discussion of sexual activity in Guillén’s poem—discussion that is unadorned by any attempt at double entendre—is most unusual even for broad talkers. The following lines constitute Guillén’s most notorious descent into the sexually explicit:

La pureza de la mujer que nunca lamió un glande.  
La pureza del que nunca succionó un clítoris.

(2:298)

(The purity of the woman who never licked a glans.  
The purity of a man who never sucked a clitoris.)

This kind of expression is unlike any to be found in even the most “smutty” *kaiso*. But this is not to say that it is unprecedented, if we

30. *Ibid.*, 106–7, 108–9.

31. Darío, *Cantos*, 88.

are to accept Abrahams's research. He reports on a tea meeting in Nevis, in the Leeward Islands, as "a remarkable combination of pageant, mock fertility ritual, variety show, and organized mayhem." The master of ceremonies, or "chairman," presides over this event and obviously has to be a master man-of-words in both broad-talk and sweet-talk registers. Abrahams affirms, "In one tea meeting reported to me, the only way one of the chairmen could reassert control was to grab his wife and to begin to do a highly obscene dance; obscenity was not out of bounds on an occasion like this."<sup>32</sup>

Obscenity, in Guillén's view, can be used when the artistic purpose demands it, even in a context in which sweet talk is the accepted medium (the distinction between sweet talk and broad talk is not taken as seriously by practitioners of Caribbean aesthetics as Abrahams would have it). In the poem "Digo que no soy un hombre puro," the artist's purpose appears to be the signaling to the world that the old poet still retains the vibrancy of youth. It is this same purpose that prompted the extreme experimentation of the book *El diario que a diario*.

Because obscenity involves the relationship between the sexes, and because it is articulated frequently by men, it is usually perceived as having an antifeminist slant. Warner approvingly cites the trenchant criticism of Merle Hodge, an intelligent Trinidadian writer who roundly condemns the kaiso's excesses in this realm: "the calypsonian, the folk poet, is assured of heartfelt, howling approval when he devotes his talent to the degradation of woman."<sup>33</sup> However, both Hodge and Warner have missed a central consideration in their zeal to castigate and categorize the kaiso. The kaiso, being essentially a carnival song, functions within the realm of play and licentiousness, as Abrahams would put it. However, it is but one part of a complex and highly structured culture in which the playful and the serious are intimately and inextricably linked in all artistic expressions. The fundamental thrust of the kaiso is not the urge to shock or to depredate; and if this were to be its sole result, the art form would have betrayed the principles on which it is based and would certainly not be greeted with any "heartfelt, howling approval."

Guillén's outspokenness in this poem is as much antimale as it is antifemale. One after another, the images in this work poke fun at the ideal of purity itself, not at either one of the partners who made the individual decision to pursue a course of celibacy. Guillén is careful to be fair to both sexes in his invective. For example, in

32. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words*, 16, 18.

33. Warner, *Kaiso!*, 99.

deriding “la pureza del virgo nonagenario” (the purity of the virgin in his nineties) (2:298), he opts for the masculine word *virgo* with the masculine form of the adjective *nonagenario* when he could just as easily have evoked the more normal *virgen*, which could take either the masculine or the feminine form of the adjective. Perhaps it is with similar reasoning that he evokes in derision “la pureza de los clérigos” (the purity of clergymen) (2:298), which, given the realities of society, he considers much more ridiculous than “la pureza de las monjas” (the purity of nuns). Certainly, by juxtaposing them he makes the point that the images of “La pureza de la que nunca parió” and of “La pureza del que no engendró nunca” (2:298) are simply two sides of the same coin.

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In fact, far from being disrespectful of women, Guillén as poet treats them with profound reverence. His attitude is consistent with principles and practices at the core of Caribbean literary expressions and, indeed, with claims that have been advanced regarding the essential tenor of African cultures and civilizations. For example, Cheikh Anta Diop, the renowned Senegalese scientist, historian, Egyptologist, and thinker, has suggested that the important role traditionally enjoyed by women in African societies may be due to the fact that they were the first to discover and harness the benefits of agriculture for the entire human race. In support of his claim, Diop cites the predominance of the matriarchal system and describes this system as “characterized by the collaboration and harmonious flowering of both sexes, and by a certain preeminence of woman in society, due originally to economic conditions, but accepted and even defended by man.”<sup>34</sup>

The strong black woman has become a feature of the Caribbean novel, enjoying a preeminent role in the fictive universe created by novelists as a mirror of real society. One need only think of Mrs. Rouse from the pivotal work *Minty Alley* (1936) by the Trinidadian intellectual giant C. L. R. James; or the mother figure of *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) by the Barbadian George Lamming; or the grandmother figures of M’man Tine in the 1950 novel *La Rue cases-nègres* (Black shack alley) by the Martinican Joseph Zobel and Miss ’Mando of *The Harder They Come* (1980) by the Jamaican Michael Thelwell. The burgeoning Central American literature created by writers of Anglophone Caribbean ancestry is itself rich in preeminent black women protagonists. Perhaps the two best examples

34. Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, 145.

are in the novels of the Costa Rican Quince Duncan: *Sitaira of La paz del pueblo* (1978) and *Lorena of Los cuatro espejos* (1973).

Perhaps the most intense expression of reverence for the Caribbean heroine is to be found in Lorna Goodison's poem "Nanny." This work ends with an image of powerful insight that rings out as a symbol and a prophecy. It is the image of a warrior woman who proclaims that she was sent and who consoles the wretched of the earth with the firm promise that other women like her "will rise."<sup>35</sup> Angela Davis could be considered one of those women announced by Nanny. She indeed rose up to comfort the sorrows of African-ancestored North Americans during the vital period of the sixties, but she has been claimed, and legitimately so, by all African peoples and even by all oppressed peoples. Guillén's poem to her was written in September 1971 and appears in *La rueda dentada*.

The poem, entitled simply "Ángela Davis," begins in the same straightforward, declamatory style as "Digo que no soy un hombre puro":

Yo no he venido aquí a decirte que eres bella.  
Creo que sí, que eres bella,  
mas no se trata de eso.

(2:300)

(I have not come here to tell you that you are beautiful.  
I do, indeed, believe that you are beautiful,  
but that's not what this is about.)

This declaration, coming so soon after his shocking poem on the subject of purity, alerts the reader to the possibility of a *diálogo picarejco*. The poet, perhaps, "doth protest too much." In any case he turns immediately to the real theme: "Se trata de que quieren que estés muerta" (It's about the fact they want you dead). Angela Davis, the beautiful young woman, is to this legendary, revolutionary poet in the dying year of his seventh decade more than just a beautiful woman, she is a hero of the oppressed.

In the middle of the poem, the question of the basic attraction of the male for a beautiful young female again raises its head, and the poet proffers the unsolicited protest:

Ángela, no estoy frente a tu nombre  
para hablarte de amor como un adolescente,  
ni para desearte como un sátiro.  
Ah, no se trata de eso.

(2:301)

35. Goodison, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, 45.

(Angela, I don't stand here before your name  
to speak to you of love like a teenager,  
nor to lust after you like a satyr.  
Ah, that's not what this is about.)

The *viejo sátiro* had in fact just uttered his mating cry, in the poem "Digo que no soy un hombre puro."<sup>36</sup> So the protestation is patently a device. It is like the declaration of a young attractive married man, whose wife is absent, to an interesting and attractive young woman who has no current husband: "Look, I am married, but. . . ." The smartman is, then, uttering his love song, a love song to a woman who is more than flesh and blood, who is a symbol of the struggle for liberation, a heroine of the people, a *mujer nueva*.

To conclude his praise song, or love song, the Poeta Nacional of revolutionary Cuba turns to the language of acclamation of heroes and heroic deeds. The first line of the final stanza is "Digo tu nombre, Ángela, vocífero. Junto mis manos" (I speak your name, Angela, I shout it out. I join my hands) (2:302). The ultimate sentiment is the correct one; the smart talk is over. The shadow cast by the appearance of the *viejo sátiro* engaged in picaroon wordplay with a lovely young *thing* is definitively removed. What the Poeta Nacional finally shouts out is "viva Ángela," uttered with the same reverence and enthusiasm as the cries of "viva Fidel" and "viva la revolución" that ring out in the new post-revolutionary Cuba. Although the carnal thrill is not far below the surface, Ángela is, like M'man Tine or Nanny, a woman of greater-than-life proportions.

Whereas the poet's encounter with Angela Davis occurred purely in the realm of spirit and art, his contact with Nancy Morejón pertained principally to the realm of reality. Angela Davis was a legendary figure as well as a beautiful young woman. In March 1972, the month Guillén's poem to her was first published, Nancy Morejón was an extremely intelligent and uncommonly attractive woman one month short of twenty-eight years old. She sat at the old man's feet, as an apprentice who was just beginning to carve a niche for herself in the annals of Cuban letters. The master bard was obviously smitten with her beauty. His opening stanza focuses on the marvelous physical presence of the young woman; she is the fascinating gazelle, the "nervioso antílope" (2:334) created by Walt Disney. Translated into everyday language, the image borders on the prosaic, for the animal created by Disney has the name Bambi,

36. My assertion is based on the poet's words in an interview with Nancy Morejón and others: "The poem 'La pureza' could possibly appear to be written by a young man. Without any vanity, I would say that it was, in fact, written by a young poet" (*Recopilación*, 57).

hardly an original or uplifting name for a brilliant young woman. However, Guillén handles the image with perfect taste, and the comparison to the Disney creation is compelling for those who know Nancy Morejón, for she is indeed:

fina gacela detenida entre el cartón y el lápiz. Los ojos grandes, grandísimos y como asombrados en su inocencia. (2:334)

(fine gazelle frozen between the paper and the pencil. The big eyes, so very big, as if amazed in their innocence.)

Guillén opts for a prose format to express his sentiments, perhaps to stem a little the gush of lyricism inspired by the beautiful Nancy. However, the opening paragraph-stanza is clearly that of a love song, and the love song par excellence for Guillén is never exclusive: Nancy is principally a poet, not officially designated Poeta Nacional, but certainly an intimately and profoundly Cuban poet. This quality constitutes her most important charm. So, the love song to Nancy is never at any point a closed communication between two people; it is a praise song uttered by the delegated representative of the Cuban nation to an excellent young poet of the nation.

The fact that Nancy is black is of considerable importance, in view of my discussion presented earlier in this chapter on the trope of the *mujer nueva*. The second stanza-paragraph, then, sharpens the focus:

Pienso que su poesía es negra como su piel, cuando la tomamos en su esencia íntima y sonámbula. Es también cubana (por eso mismo) con la raíz enterrada muy hondo hasta salir por el otro lado del planeta, donde se la puede ver sólo el instante en que la Tierra se detiene para que la retraten los cosmonautas. (2:334-355)

(I think that her poetry is black, as is her skin, when we take it in its intimate and somnambulant essence. It is also Cuban (for that very reason) with its roots buried very deep, so deep as to come out on the other side of the planet, where they can be seen only in that instant when the earth stops to be photographed by cosmonauts.)

Consistent with Guillén's core doctrine, Nancy's blackness is but a manifestation of her Cubanness and her universality. It is the medium through which she achieves her most intimate expression and thereby her most artistic and human expression. The reference to the space race is almost de rigueur for the Poeta Nacional of a nation that, just ninety miles from the coast of Florida, has become in effect a Soviet satellite.<sup>37</sup>

37. In fact, the first African-ancestored cosmonaut was a Cuban who participated in the Soviet space program.

The third and final stanza-paragraph confirms the direction taken in the second. The lovely Nancy is a symbol of black womanhood. She becomes the *mujer nueva*—her beauty is authentically African, her hair is left in its beautiful natural state:

Yo amo su sonrisa, su carne oscura, su cabeza africana. Su cabeza sin  
tostar, dicho sea para aludir a los tostadores . . . que se queman la  
cabellera. (2:335)

(I love her smile, her dark skin, her African hair. Her hair that is not fried, I say this to allude to those who fry . . . who burn their hair.)

In the seventies, the polemic over hair care was of great significance for African-ancestored peoples. On the basis of this issue, the poet moves from the egocentric private realm of romantic poetry (“yo amo su sonrisa”) to the transcendent and public realm, where Nancy Morejón joins Angela Davis and receives the appropriate show of respect. The sentiments expressed in the final two lines of the poem are clear:

Soy su partidario, voto por ella, la elijo y proclamo. Grito, desaforado:  
¡Viva Nancy! (2:335)

(I am her follower, I vote for her, I elect her and proclaim her. I shout out, lustily: Viva Nancy!)

The master bard takes his position at the feet of Nancy, the symbol, the *mujer nueva*. What began as a love song becomes a praise song of the highest order.

It is interesting to note that, whereas some commentators (Merle Hodge and Keith Warner, for example) view the Guillenesque-kaiso approach to women as basically disrespectful, there are many women who find it consistent with their self-respect and the fundamental spirit of their culture. One such woman is the Costa Rican poet of Anglophone Caribbean ancestry, Eulalia Bernard. Her first and still her only book of poems, *Ritmobéroe*, appeared in 1982. The book begins and ends with poetic pieces that in effect define her vision of liberation. The first of these is “Seamos libres” (Let us be free), which begins with an unadulterated negative, a “No!” that will be used four times in the opening three lines, indicating the poet’s free choice and her conscious rejection of the mutual self-centeredness that commonly undergirds the man-woman relationship. What the poet opts for is, in fact, absolute selfless generosity in the man-woman relationship, a generosity unstintingly practiced on her part that will elicit—it must be supposed—an outpouring of mutual self-giving, which she compares to the copious waters flowing from an opened canal lock. The poem is characteristically short:

¡No!, no me hables así  
desvela tu cuerpo.

¡No!, no busques excusas  
por tu ausencia, tus defectos;  
abracémonos como las esclusas y  
dejemos el agua expelida  
correr libremente  
por el canal de la vida.

¡Seamos amigos  
seamos libremente amigos!<sup>38</sup>

(No! don't speak to me like that  
bare your body.

No! don't look for excuses  
for your absence, your defects;  
let us embrace each other like locks and  
let us allow the expelled water  
to run freely  
through the canal of life.

Let us be friends  
let us be free to be friends!)

Love is portrayed through the circumlocutory device of the double entendre in anatomically realistic terms. This sensual, practical love must proceed from a rejection of bitter recriminations. It is a generous giving of self, a sure path to the liberation and true friendship of the last line.

The Spanish term *Nosotros*, the title of Bernard's closing poem, can have the narrow, private, and eminently romantic acceptance of "you and me." However, in this poem it has been given the public sense of "all of us." Most significantly, in this age of militant, gratuitously antimale and confrontational feminism, the *nosotros* are both men and women, and not *nosotras* (meaning "all of us women"), a distinctly feminist code word. This poem, then, quite clearly complements the vision expressed in "Seamos libres": Bernard's social concerns are not gender-based but group-based and, in fact, for those who are familiar with the inner dynamics of her art, race-based. In a poem like "Equilibrio," she focuses uncompromisingly on the physical aspects of love between a man and a woman. In "Cariño," the female persona expresses sentiments that appear to carry self-giving to the extreme of one-sided self-abasement. How-

38. Eulalia Bernard, *Ritmobéroe*, 23.

ever, the extreme self-sacrificing maternalism of the female could be interpreted as simply a manifestation of vulnerable tenderness. To be vulnerable is to be human, and it is quite clear that the persona expects her male partner to accept unashamedly his own vulnerability. The female in this instance is portrayed as the morally superior of the pair.<sup>39</sup>



Nicolás Guillén's approach to the relationship between the sexes will find favor with most Caribbean men, and, insofar as this male author can judge, with most Caribbean women as well. Caribbean people, in general, prefer to make love rather than talk about it. (Included in the concept "talking about love" are certain formulaic, almost ritualistic, practices common in Western culture that are supposed to be external signs of deep inner feelings: kissing, for example, and frequent repetitions of the words "I love you.")<sup>40</sup> Caribbean people are practical, sensual, and earthy; yet at the same time they are idealistic and spiritual. They can be hot-blooded, but also moderate, reticent, courteous, and even self-consciously timid. They are no better lovers than any other group, but they do have a distinctive style of loving. As I have shown, Nicolás Guillén's poetry captures the true spirit of this style, especially in and through his elaboration of the trope of the *mujer nueva*.

39. This aspect of Bernard's poetry is more completely analyzed in my "Eulalia Bernard: A Caribbean Woman Writer and the Dynamics of Liberation," 79-85.

40. I make these assertions on the basis of my experience and observations as a West Indian male who has lived more than half his life, and all his adult life, in North America and Europe.



## The Central Creative Conflict, *Mulatez*

V.S. Naipaul's brilliant first novel, *Miguel Street*, tells the compelling tale of a certain B. Wordsworth, the strangest of a group of rather unusual types who would call at the house of the young narrator:

He was a small man and he was tidily dressed. . . .

My mother came out, looked at the man and asked him in an unfriendly way, "What you want?"

. . . His English was so good, it didn't sound natural, and I could see my mother was worried. . . .

I said, "What you does do, mister?"

He got up and said, "I am a poet."

I said, "A good poet?"

He said, "The greatest in the world."

"What your name, mister?"

"B. Wordsworth."

"B for Bill?"

"Black, Black Wordsworth. White Wordsworth was my brother."

The fascinating tale continues:

He pulled out a printed sheet from his hip-pocket and said, "On this paper is the greatest poem about mothers and I'm going to sell it to you at a bargain price. For four cents."

I went inside and I said, "Ma, you want to buy a poetry for four cents?"

My mother said, "Tell that blasted man to haul his tail away from my yard, you hear."

. . . I said, "Is a funny way to go round selling poetry like that. Only calypsonians do that sort of thing. A lot of people does buy?"

He said, "No one has yet bought a single copy."

. . . "How you does live, Mr. Wordsworth?" I asked him one day.  
 He said, "You mean how I get money?"  
 When I nodded, he laughed in a crooked way.  
 He said, "I sing calypsoes in the calypso season."

In a short space of time, the young narrator develops a profound relationship with this uncommon but kindred spirit. However, the strange bard disappears, leaving the narrator's life in a manner as dramatic and sudden as he had entered it. The chapter ends with the telling, stark declaration "It was just as though B. Wordsworth had never existed."<sup>1</sup>

The episode brilliantly sums up the plight of poets in general, and the plight of the poet in colonial Caribbean society in particular. B. Wordsworth is a contradiction in terms. With tragic irony, this poetic soul fails to connect with the vibrant forces of poetry in his society. He rejects the very basis of all poetic expression and opts for an unnatural, artistically sterile imitation instead of the rich, beautiful, natural speech of his fellow citizens. His powerful artistic instinct guides him like radar to the sources of inspiration—he is a calypsonian, and he finds the young Naipaul a kindred poetic spirit. However, B. Wordsworth in every case misses the cue, blinded by a slavish need to imitate. His destruction is, in fact, self-inflicted. The reaction of the narrator's mother is eminently justified: with the unerring instinct of the common folk, and with their characteristically direct language, she sends B. Wordsworth packing. The end result is inevitable—his obliteration from the face of the earth.

Nicolás Guillén was once a B. Wordsworth or, more precisely, an M. Darío, a mulatto Darío. Fortunately, he made the right choices, rejected imitative and unnatural language, and found his own true voice. His contribution to Hispanic letters is seminal, and it is important to ensure that this contribution is fully appreciated. For the existence of appropriate receivers is as important as the existence of the transmitter. Both positions must be filled for art to be realized. Naipaul alerted us only to the problem of the sender in B. Wordsworth's case: "It was just as though [he] had never existed." Clearly, the problem could also lie with the receivers. Indeed, it can still be said that, outside a restricted academic circle, Nicolás Guillén is a totally unknown entity in the general non-Hispanic Caribbean. It is just as though he had never existed.

I aim to ensure that the lesson of B. Wordsworth is broadcast, that Guillén comes to exist for everyone who reads English. I have created an appropriate critical framework for a full appreciation of

1. Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, 45–46, 47, 50, 52.

the contribution this important Caribbean poet made to the world of art. This framework can be considered a Pan-Caribbean poetics. The final task at hand is to present an assessment of the appreciating framework employed throughout this book. This kind of assessment is ultimately philosophical, since it involves standing back, not from raw reality but from the mental processes that examine reality, requiring an examination of examination, and all the potential for mystification that this entails. The assessment must be undertaken, however, to give proper closure to the arguments I advance and to the contribution made by this book.



Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century thinker and one of Europe's greatest minds, in his brilliant discourse on the human condition, uses the device of the "renversement du pour au contre" (the inverting of pros and cons) to make his position virtually unassailable. In his view, "demi-savants" (sciologists) make fun of the common people, and think them stupid, for making fundamental distinctions based on inherently inconsequential trivia. However, applying the principle of the "renversement du pour au contre," he shows that the people's basic conclusions, while founded on laughable logic, are in fact fundamentally sound. They are right *per accidens* and not *per se*: "Il faut avoir une pensée de derrière, et juger de tout par là, en parlant cependant comme le peuple" (One must have an *arrière-pensée* on which to base all judgments, while continuing to speak like everyone else).<sup>2</sup> Pascal, more than most, recognized that contradiction is the fuel, if not the very stuff, of reality. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, one of the most important men-of-words in the Caribbean today, fires his own poetry with a rhythm of contradiction that Gordon Rohlehr refers to as a "constant ambiguity in the development of key-words." This is a feature that must be both accepted and understood before Brathwaite's work can be fully appreciated; it is a feature that, in Rohlehr's view, "has confused some of his critics, who [have been] blind to the conscious design for ambiguity."<sup>3</sup>

African religions and philosophies recognize that the deepest rhythms of the universe are dialectical. The Bantu philosophical system, for example, sees Being as a force or positive energy that is constantly obstructed by its opposite, Nonbeing. All the mysteries and celebrations of Bantu civilization play out the contradiction that lies at the heart of human existence and at the heart of Being.

2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 145-46.

3. Rohlehr, *The Pathfinder*, 65.

Initiation rites, for instance, are occasions when the young die as youths in order to be brought to life as adults. In the wakes of African-ancestored Americans, the tragedy of death and separation is countered by the celebration of vitality and licentiousness. Indeed, as Roger D. Abrahams points out, the unleashing of disordered, licentious, nonsense behavior on such occasions helps the participants come to terms with the chaos and ultimate inexplicability of reality.<sup>4</sup> The fundamental social confusion of death lies in its monumental contradiction, its absurd affront to man's intelligence, his sense of security, and his integrity as a being. Death for the existentialists, for example, is the ultimate and unforgivable scandal. Over the millennia of their civilized existence, Africans have traditionally faced this affront not with despairing rage but with the profound wisdom of therapeutic laughter.

Christianity builds on fundamental contradictions. It roundly proclaims as one of its central tenets that Christ the Savior died so that we might live. One of the basic principles of its ascesis is the death of the individual self so that he or she may live in the Risen Lord. Marxism, the much vaunted antithesis to Christianity in the contemporary world, also recognizes the importance of contradiction and, in fact, posits its metaphysics squarely on the dialectic. Marxism as a philosophical system is a dialectical materialism. Absurdly truncated by its fundamental atheism, Marxism's explanation of the cosmos recognizes the fundamental empowering force of contradiction.

There is, in the arsenal of some logical systems, a so-called law of noncontradiction, which would mandate that a being cannot be and not be at the same time. This law is commonly posited by scholastic philosophers, modern-day followers of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, as a self-evident first principle. It must itself be considered self-contradictory, however, as it cannot be conceived of as applying to the Being par excellence, the First Cause, the Uncaused Cause. It certainly has to be suspended absolutely for dialectical materialism to work. Octavio Paz, the important contemporary Mexican poet, professor, and aesthete, claims that the fullness of beauty created by man, namely, poetic expression, results ultimately from a defying of the principle of noncontradiction. The poetic image establishes an identity between one thing, *esto*, and another, *aquello*, which the normal laws of reasoning posit as a non-*esto*. Paz, who spent much time in India, declares, "The Oriental mind has not felt any horror of the 'other,' of what is and is not at the same time.

4. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words*, 81.

The Western world is the world of 'either this or that'; the Eastern, one of 'this and that' and even of 'this is that.'"<sup>5</sup>

All these considerations apply to my argument in two fundamental ways, internally and externally: internally because Nicolás Guillén posits a dialectical relationship between Europe and Africa as the source of his creativity, which he calls *mulatez*; externally because the argument I present in this book represents a break from the mainstream of literary exegesis. I attempt to appreciate Guillén, the Caribbean poet, on the basis of an indigenous literary theory, and this approach contradicts those of other books on Guillén. The focus of this contradiction is the African cultural heritage, the Afrocenteredness. And just as my presentation is constructed on Afrocenteredness, it can be deconstructed on the very same principle.

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In October of 1931, exactly one year and six months after the first appearance of *Motivos de son*, Guillén's work *Sóngoro cosongo* was published with the subtitle *Poemas mulatos*. The work is preceded by a prologue that could be considered a manifesto. Echoing his erstwhile grand master, Rubén Darío, he proclaims, "Mi prólogo es mío" (My prologue is mine) (1:113). He goes on to say:

I am not unaware, of course, of the fact that these verses will be repugnant to some people, because they talk about black people and about common folk. That doesn't matter to me. . . . I will say finally that these are mulatto verses. They flow . . . from the same elements that enter into Cuba's ethnic composition, we all are somewhat touched with blackness. Is that painful? I don't think so. In any case, it must be said lest we forget it. . . . It is my opinion that a Creole poetry for us would be incomplete if the black contribution were forgotten. . . . Thus, Cuba's spirit is *mestizo*. (1:113-14)

The spirit of *mulatez* was, then, the guiding force of his creativity, as from April 1930. In an interview, Francisco Garzón Céspedes asked the poet if there were any great differences between his pre- and post-revolutionary poetry. His reply is clear:

Yes, I think that there are great differences with respect to theme, technique, and influences. Do not forget that any authentic work will reflect the historical, social, and economic conditions in which it was conceived and produced. . . . I repeat, I think that my permanent

5. Octavio Paz, *El arco y la lira: El poema, la revelación poética, poesía e historia*, 102.

adherence to the revolution, over a period of nearly forty years, and my consequent adherence to its styles of expression left somewhat in the background of my spirit certain creative possibilities, which are now making themselves manifest. Now that the ideal fervently advanced by that poetry has fundamentally become reality in my country, what had been submerged is now being brought to the surface. All of this is authentic, then, and does not represent any *pose*; and even less—to be sure—any opportunism. My poetic expression has always enjoyed an inner consistency.<sup>6</sup>



*Mulatez* is a cultural concept of direct artistic relevance, which involves an awakening to the full importance of the African cultural heritage. This new awareness engenders conflict in every cultural sphere, be it social, political, economic, or psychological—the inevitable conflict between Eurocentered and Afrocentered realities. In Guillén's view, the conflict of thesis and antithesis must be faced and resolved through the harmonious blending or synthesis of the opposing elements. In a real sense, there is conflict at the heart of Guillén's creativity; it is the very fount of that creativity. Without the tensions generated by the clash between Europe and Africa, Guillén's best and most characteristic work would have no emotional core.

The concept of *mulatez* finds direct expression in several of Guillén's poems. The most significant is, perhaps, the "Balada de los dos abuelos." This work, from the collection *West Indies, Ltd*, is written predominantly in octosyllabic lines, combined with five- and three-syllable lines. There appears to be no regular rhyme scheme, but an assonance in *e-o* imposes itself throughout the entire poem. Significantly, this is the assonance in the words *abuelo*, *negro* and *veo* (I see), the last word of the first line. By the same token, the assonance *a-o*, as in *blanco* (white), is also frequently employed. The stanzas are irregular in length. The poet is clearly not making any great effort to stay within the well-worked traditions of Hispanic verse. However, this poem is not a *son*; it is close to the innovative, somewhat rebellious, spirit of contemporary Hispanic poetry and, in this regard, looks more to the *abuelo blanco* than to the *abuelo negro*.

The *abuelos* are introduced as *sombras* (shadows) and then presented in a series of paired images that symbolize and characterize them. In the second strophe, "lanza con punta de hueso" (lance with a bone tip) and "tambor" (drum), associated with the *abuelo*

6. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 56-57.

*negro*, are paired with “Gorguera en el cuello ancho” (Ruff on a wide collar) and the “gris armadura” (gray armor), associated with the *abuelo blanco* (1:137). Then in the third stanza, “Africa de selvas húmedas” (Africa with its damp jungles) is contrasted with the “galeón ardiendo en oro” (galley ablaze with gold) (1:138). Of the two *abuelos*, one is dying and the other is tired. One is associated with the sun and the other with the moon.

In the fourth stanza, the historical and geographical context of their confrontation is clarified further. The opening lines evoke images of ships, black people, sugarcane, the whip, and the slaveholder. Then the horrors of slavery are suggestively presented:

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.

(1:138-39)

(A stone of tears and blood,  
veins and eyes wide open,  
and early morning emptiness,  
and dusks at the sugar mill,  
and a great voice, a loud voice  
ripping the silence to shreds.)

These images are based on the implied, in fact preconscious, complicity of the reader, who thereby enters into the creative process with the poet.<sup>7</sup> This aspect of Guillén’s creative technique is, of course, consistent with the major trends in nineteenth-century and contemporary Western art.

In the penultimate stanza, the *sombras* metamorphose into more material existence. They become individuals with names, Don Federico and Taita Facundo—the “Don” that immediately precedes the given name is the traditional Hispanic formula for showing

7. Carlos Bousoño, in *Teoría de la expresión poética*, 1:137-76, calls these “imágenes visionarias” (visionary images) and he distinguishes them from “imágenes tradicionales” (traditional images), which are created on the basis of rational analysis. The great tropes of world literature—which relate to feminine beauty as a flower or fruit, for example—are perfect examples of “imágenes tradicionales.” The “imagen visionaria” relies for its effectiveness on an irrationally or suprationally perceived identity between two terms of comparison. The reader’s real or imagined experience of slavery evokes the same kind of emotional reaction as his confrontation with the image “atardeceres de ingenio,” or “fuerte voz / despedazando el silencio.”

respect, and "Taita" has the same force as "Uncle," in "Uncle Remus" or "Uncle Tom" for example. The last line of this penultimate stanza manifests the powerful force of poetic volition and effects the synthesis, the harmonious blending of Europe and Africa, in the stark "Yo los junto" (I join them) (1:139). The counterpoint carried on throughout the poem thus attains its intellectual peak.

The rhythm of the final stanza intensifies, mostly through the repetition of the line "los dos del mismo tamaño" (the two of the same stature). The new urgency of the rhythm gives the impression of an erotic coupling that is resolved in the climactic two-syllable line "Cantan" (they sing) with which the poem concludes, peaking affectively. A most appropriate final stanza for this ballad, it reads:

—¡Federico!  
 ¡Facundo! Los dos se abrazan.  
 Los dos suspiran. Los dos  
 las fuertes cabezas alzan;  
 los dos del mismo tamaño,  
 bajo las estrellas altas;  
 los dos del mismo tamaño,  
 ansia negra y ansia blanca,  
 los dos del mismo tamaño,  
 gritan, sueñan, lloran, cantan.  
 Sueñan, lloran, cantan.  
 Lloran, cantan.  
 ¡Cantan!

(1:139)

(—Federico!  
 Facundo! The two embrace.  
 The two sigh. The two  
 raise their strong heads;  
 the two of the same stature,  
 under the far-off stars;  
 the two of the same stature  
 black and white, both longing,  
 the two of the same stature,  
 they shout, they dream, they cry, they sing.  
 They dream, they cry, they sing.  
 They cry, they sing.  
 They sing!)

The rhythmic pattern is, of course, the familiar one of the *son* poems, the most effective rhythm of the poet's repertoire and the artistic element that accounts for much of the beauty of this poem.

The poem represents the realization of *mulatez*, speaking through technique as well as theme to the fundamental relationship, the partnership, between Europe and Africa, the two *abuelos*. The harmonious aesthetic union in both form and content effectively symbolizes the cultural union that is *mulatez*.

Many other poems directly address the concept of *mulatez*. In fact, the image of the shadowy *abuelo* is used in the poem "El abuelo" of the same book, *West Indies, Ltd.* It is an alexandrine sonnet with a twist, entirely worthy of the Caribbean master bard who was also the consummate smartman. The first line presents:

Esta mujer angélica de ojos septentrionales,  
que vive atenta al ritmo de su sangre europea,  
ignora que en lo hondo de ese ritmo golpea  
un negro el parche duro de roncós atabales.

(1:149)

(This angelic woman with her northern eyes,  
who lives attentive only to the rhythm of her European blood,  
in ignorance of the fact that deep within this rhythm a black  
beats the coarse skins of raucous drums.)

The shadowy element is essential to the thrust of the sonnet, for the punch line in the final tercet reads:

que ya verás, inquieta, junto a la fresca orilla  
la dulce sombra oscura del abuelo que huye,  
el que rizó por siempre tu cabeza amarilla.

(1:149)

(One day you will see, to your chagrin, close to the cool bank  
the sweet dark shadow of the fleeing grandfather,  
the one who put that permanent curl in your yellow hair.)

The blonde female so proud of her European heritage is reminded by the poet, in his inimitably picaroon style, of the ubiquity of *mulatez*. These lines recall those of an earlier poem, "La canción del bongo" (The song of the bongo) from *Sóngoro cosongo*:

siempre falta algún abuelo,  
cuando no sobra algún Don

(1:117)

(There's always either a grandfather missing,  
or some noble title slipped in.)

Both poems depend for their effectiveness on the readers' understanding of, if not familiarity with, the whole question of race

relations in Cuba—and, indeed, in the Americas in general. They could be written only by a poet honest enough to include into his poetic universe elements from both the thesis and the antithesis which create the synthesis that is Cuban culture.

The poem “Dos niños” (Two children), again from *West Indies, Ltd*, also explicitly addresses the question of the relationship between the sons of Europe and Africa in Cuba. In “Poema con niños” (A poem with children) from *El son entero*, the poet presents in dramatic form a conflict among four children, one Jewish, one European, one Chinese, and one African. The mother of the Euro-Cuban child resolves the conflict by invoking the principle of *mulatez*. “Son número 6” (*Son* number 6), also from *El son entero*, begins with a resounding proclamation of the persona’s African heritage:

Yoruba soy, lloro en yoruba  
 .....

Yoruba soy, soy lucumí,  
 mandinga, congo, carabalí.

(1:231–32)

(I am Yoruba, I weep in Yoruba  
 .....

I am Yoruba, I am *lucumí* [a Yoruba speaker]  
 Mandingo, Congo, *carabalí* [Ibo].)

However, the theme of the racial blend that constitutes the Cuban ethos is also presented and, in fact, becomes paramount. The abiding image of the work is contained in the following lines from the central *son* portion of the poem:

Estamos juntos desde muy lejos,  
 jóvenes, viejos,  
 negros y blancos, todo mezclado;

(1:232)

(We have been together for quite a long time,  
 young, old,  
 blacks and whites, all mixed together.)

The Martinican critic Alfred Melon has been particularly struck with how often these, or remarkably similar, images turn up in Guillén’s poetry (he uses the term *obsession* in his analysis): “The constant juxtaposition in fraternal solidarity of blacks and whites, rather, their constant mixing, is perhaps Nicolás Guillén’s greatest obsession, and it is not mere sentimentality for it bespeaks a con-

structive efficacy and force."<sup>8</sup> Since the mulatto is biologically at the crossroads where Europe and Africa meet, his physical duality has frequently been accompanied by sociological and psychological dysfunction. His identity is frequently assailed in the most fundamental fashion by external pressures and, indeed, intense internal pressures too.<sup>9</sup> Neither black nor white, the mulatto's metaphysical alienation is likely to give him a clearer insight into the primordial contradiction of the human condition. Guillén seems to have developed the potential of this difficult position. He avoided the pathological pitfalls of his own biological and sociological *mulatez*, and, by elaborating on its positive aspects and incorporating these into his active artistic and psychological life, he converted a potential nightmare into poetic inspiration.<sup>10</sup> The artist often builds beauty out of his own psychoses and neuroses; however, in this case, the aesthetic profit appears to have been made only after the destructive *mulatez* was transformed into a positive force.

Melon, being a Marxist critic, is naturally partial to the idea of synthesis and sees Guillén as "el poeta de la síntesis" (the poet of synthesis), a view he defends with masterful arguments.<sup>10</sup> He asserts, for example, that the poet's "synthesizing vocation" was already evident in his earliest works, and he cites the following lines from "La balada azul":

Frente al mar, viendo las olas  
la quieta orilla besar,  
los dos muy juntos, muy juntos

(Facing the sea, seeing the waves

8. Morejón, *Recopilación*, 216.

9. Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*, confirms my assertion. Although he is speaking principally of the Brazilian situation, it is clear that the Cuban situation could not have been very different. The situation in Trinidad and Tobago, my native country, has been similar in many ways to that described in Degler's book. It seems quite reasonable to assume that analogous patterns would have developed in countries as similar as Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil, along with many others that have had similar historical experiences in the matter of race relations. Degler asserts poignantly, with more than adequate demonstration, "The lot of the mulatto in Brazil can be anxiety-producing. Not white, yet often wanting to be so, the mulatto nevertheless can be classed as a black at any time a room clerk or maitre d'hotel chooses to treat him as such. This, too, is the negative side of the mulatto escape hatch" (*Neither Black nor White*, 170). There is evidence that at least some of this turmoil was experienced by Guillén, and it is borne out in his remark about being a "mulato bastante claro 'y de pelo.'"

10. Alfred Melon, "El poeta de la síntesis," in Morejón, *Recopilación*, 199-242.

kiss the still shore,  
the two of us together, close together.)

Of course, the image of “los dos muy juntos” is natural in a love poem. However, Melon attaches special significance to it. He points out that it is repeated later in the same poem:

al pie de la fuente clara  
juntos, muy juntos los dos.

(At the foot of the clear fountain  
together, the two of us close together.)

He cites this as yet another example of “the obsession with pairs, the reiteration of the expressions *de dos en dos*, *los dos juntos*, *muy juntos*,” in Guillén’s poetic work.<sup>11</sup>

Samples of these recurring images of pairing and togetherness can be seen in the poems I analyzed previously in this chapter. Melon cites many other examples, especially in the poem “No sé por qué piensas tú” (I don’t know why you think), from the collection *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas*, which was first published in Mexico in 1937. Perhaps the most aesthetic example of Guillén’s obsession with duality, this poem is a clever and moving play on “tú” (you) and “yo” (I). All the lines, except three, end with “tú” or “yo.” The three exceptions act as the strong link, like two strong hands firmly clasped, uniting “tú” and “yo.” Two exceptions come from the line “si somos la misma cosa” (if we are the same thing), which is repeated to heighten its intensity, and the third exception is the only line in which the pivotal “juntos” is articulated, “juntos en la misma calle” (together in the same street) (1:175, 176).

Much of the effectiveness of the poem, and this is often the case with Guillén, comes from its simplicity. It begins:

No sé por qué piensas tú,  
soldado, que te odio yo,  
si somos la misma cosa  
yo,  
tú.

(1:175)

(I don’t know why you think  
soldier, that I hate you  
if we are the same thing  
I,  
you.)

11. *Ibid.*, 229.

Written in 1937, the year Guillén joined the Communist party, the poem evokes deep emotions of revolutionary solidarity between the divided, and conquered, oppressed groups. It represents what Frantz Fanon called the Radicalization phase, when the native artist or intellectual participates in the real revolutionary struggle. Guillén tries to persuade the soldier, who is one of the Cuban people, to open his eyes, become aware of, and desist from his complicity in the brutal oppression of his brothers, a complicity that is a necessary, and indeed sufficient, condition for the colonial process. In the stanza quoted above, three octosyllabic lines are joined to the two one-syllable lines, “yo” and “tú,” to take the strophe beyond the limits of the traditional, and very popular, romance form. The special structure is intimately bound to the content, with that impressive matching of form and content that always attends good art.

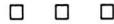
Building through the rhythmic interplay of “tú” and “yo,” the final stanza comes to a climax:

Ya nos veremos yo y tú  
 juntos en la misma calle,  
 hombro con hombro, tú y yo,  
 sin odios ni yo ni tú,  
 pero sabiendo tú y yo,  
 a dónde vamos yo y tú...  
 ¡No sé por qué piensas tú,  
 soldado, que te odio yo!

(1:176)

(One day we'll meet, I and you,  
 together on the same street,  
 shoulder to shoulder, you and I,  
 with no hatred either in me or in you,  
 but knowing, you and I,  
 where we're going, I and you . . .  
 I don't know why you should think,  
 soldier, that I hate you!)

The obsession with pairing reaches its highest pitch of intensity in this last strophe, since not only are “tú” and “yo” matched by being the final words of the lines and hence the basis of the rhyme, but also, in most of the lines, they are actually joined as well: “tú y yo.” The only line that does not enter into this pattern is the one that contains the very significant image “juntos.” In fact, the sense of “juntos” is reaffirmed by the “misma” (same) that qualifies “calle,” and so a double idea of unity is employed to bond “tú y yo.”



Duality is at the core of reality. Guillén himself posited *mulatez*, an expression of duality and the creative dialogue between Africa and Europe, as the core of his art. Every feature of Guillén's art that I have analyzed in this book flows from *mulatez*, and it is precisely this *mulatez* that links Guillén's art so closely to the Caribbean sensibility and culture, for this same duality is at the core of West Indianness or Caribbeanness. Every Caribbean artistic expression examined in these chapters—from the Cuban *son* to the kaiso from Trinidad and Tobago or the Colombian *vallenato*—results from some synthesis of African and European elements. For example, the particular process that produced the carnival in Trinidad and Tobago (with its accompanying kaiso) was seen to be a rich, complex synthesis uniting various European elements—Spanish, French, and English, in particular—with African culture, which was itself the end product of the synthesizing processes of New World slavery.

Anyone interested in forging, or merely exploring, a common Caribbean sensibility, in order to remedy the pernicious fragmentation imposed by the colonial experience, must, then, take the carnival kaiso from Trinidad and Tobago into very careful consideration. However, the *mulatez* at the core of Guillén's poetry is, in fact, synthesis enough—it provides an area of cultural communality within the fragmented Caribbean. It is interesting that, although this region is populated overwhelmingly by African-ancestored peoples, the fragmentation is found mostly in the European element, the most important element of diversity being the various European languages spoken in the area. The original African ethnic groups and their corresponding cultures quickly lost their functional specificities under the barbaric treatment meted out by the Europeans. However, the Africans' experience with the process of cultural synthesis will bear fruit in the Caribbean, through *mulatez*, as has already happened in Guillén's poetry. Thus, the creative dialogue, which generated this poetry by overcoming the stony silence imposed by Europe's cultural hegemony, must in time grow to fill the entire region with its rich cadences, to banish forever the hostile, self-serving, limitingly egocentric silences that once prevailed.

The argument I present in this book is based on incontrovertible reasoning and is backed up by solid evidence; however, it is susceptible, like all human arguments, to the ineluctable "renversement du pour au contre." If *mulatez* can be seen as a dialogue that replaces the stultifying Eurocentric indifference, why could it not be considered an act of Afrocentric hostility that simply substitutes for its

European equivalent? Since Afrocenteredness is the base on which my argument is constructed, it is also the base from which the argument can be deconstructed. It will have to be assumed that no amount of appeals to clear historical records, or to what has been called common sense, would satisfy those who want to deconstruct my argument on the grounds of its limiting Afrocentrism, or those who, in the language of contemporary United States jurisprudential sociology, would label it "reverse discrimination." The ultimate and incontestable response is that, in the realm of art and artistic explanation, one can both have one's cake and eat it too. The pillar of strength of any argument is also necessarily its Achilles' heel. Deconstruction is the highest form of construction. Those who accept the Afrocentrism of my presentation will find my argument unassailable. Those who do not will find it fundamentally flawed.

What is beyond doubt is that this book represents an exercise in Caribbean literary criticism in the fullest possible sense—not only is the subject I study Caribbean, but the process of criticism I use is Caribbean. As I hope I have shown in practice, a truly Caribbean poetics can be posited on *mulatez*, the most appropriate analytical framework for appreciating Guillén's poetry. I have argued that Nicolás Guillén, the people's poet, the Poeta Nacional of contemporary Cuba, is a Caribbean poet par excellence, one of a special group of artists and writers from the region. In fact, just as he was president of the Cuban National Union of Artists and Writers, he could have been made honorary head of a Pan-Caribbean union of artists and writers.<sup>12</sup> Other prominent members of this group, in this world as well as in the realm of the ancestors, would be the Mighty Sparrow, Black Stalin, Beny Moré, Celia Cruz, Johnny Ventura, Eulalia Bernard, Lorna Goodison, Nancy Morejón, Gerardo Maloney, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Wilfred Cartey, Jacques Roumain, Jean Brière, Robert Nestor Marley, and many others. To make this argument is to establish the utmost validity of a Caribbean literary criticism.

12. This idea is not quite as farfetched as it sounds, for during the 1979 Carifesta, which took place in Cuba, I was privileged to witness Guillén presiding over a gathering of artistes, writers, and scholars from the entire Caribbean region.



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# INDEX

- Abrahams, Roger D., 23, 29, 30, 67  
Abydos, 11  
Africa: dialectical relationship with Europe, 163  
African, 4, 14; de-Africanized, 16  
African-ancestored populations, 14  
African heritage, 2, 5, 11, 13, 17, 25, 42, 69, 127, 132, 139, 151, 168; in Caribbean humor, 83; in Cuban art, 138; links *kaiso* to *son*, 16, 42, 59–60  
Africanness, 13, 17  
African origin, 10, 11, 51–52  
African poet as prophet, 62  
African West Indian, 2  
Afro-Antillean poetry, 33, 34, 102, 131  
Afrocenteredness, 163, 172, 173  
Afro-Cuban liturgical songs, 129  
Afro-Hispanic, 45  
Anglophone Caribbean, 7, 95–96, 126  
Animism, 17, 24; 127. *See also* Humanization  
*Antillano*, 2, 5  
Appreciating principle, 8, 10  
Arozarena, Marcelino, 34, 131–32  
Aruba, 3  
Athens, 12  
Atilla (Raymond Quevedo), 10, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 40  
Augier, Angel, 3, 4  
  
Baehr, Rudolf, 44  
Bantu philosophy, 42–43, 65, 128, 134, 161  
  
Barbados, 10, 16, 17  
*Bastante claro y de pelo*, 96, 99, 102, 103  
Bécquer, Gustavo Adolfo, 141, 142–43, 144  
Bello, Andrés, 44–45  
Benítez-Rojo, Antonio, 35, 36  
Bernard, Eulalia, 155–57  
Black consciousness, heightened, 138  
Black Orpheus, 102  
Black Spanish, 51, 55  
Black woman: her beauty, 111; her strength, 151–52  
*Bomba*, 9  
Borges, Jorge Luis, 1  
Booth, Wayne C., 8  
Brathwaite, Edward Kamau, 3, 9, 31, 35, 48, 60, 66  
Brière, Jean, 5, *5n10*, 173  
British, 15, 16  
Broad talk, 30, 31, 73–74, 149–51  
Brown, Sterling, 1  
  
Call-response, 11  
Calypso, 10  
Camus, Albert, 66  
*Caña*, as trope, 111, 112, 114, 115, 117, 120, 135, 136  
Capitalism, international, 117  
Capitulation phase, 96, 97, 98, 99, 127  
Caribbean: countries, 2, 7, 8, 17, 172; culture, 14, 15, 25, 26, 68, 107, 122; literary theory, 6, 7, 173; poetry, 1, 2, 9, 10, 59, 123, 124

- "Caribbean Man, The," 101, 101*n*11  
 Caribbeaness, 2, 25, 172  
 Carnival, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 21, 35, 38  
 Carpentier, Alejo, 6, 9, 16, 17, 34, 39, 43  
 Cartey, Wilfred, 5, 6  
*Casa de las Américas*, 2  
*Casa del Caribe*, 2, 8  
 Central America, 7, 120  
 Césaire, Aimé, 81, 102, 121–22, 127, 128–29, 173  
 Chalkdust (Hollis Liverpool), 10, 20  
 Chantwell, 11, 14  
*Choteo*, 73  
*Cimarrón*, 24, 25, 116, 119, 121  
*Cimarronaje*, 110, 114, 120, 121, 123  
 Cobb, Martha K., 31  
*Coherente consigo mismo*, 96  
 Colombia, 9, 12, 13, 17, 19  
 Colonial authorities, 13, 14, 16  
 Columbus, Christopher, 14  
 Communist party, Guillén joins, 171  
 Conflict, Euro-Afro, 159–73  
 Congo dancers 12, 13  
 Contradiction in human condition, 63, 65, 161, 162, 163  
 Cortijo y su combo, 75–76  
 Costa Rica, 7  
 Couffon, Claude, 4  
 Coulthard, G. R., 2, 5, 33, 132  
 Creative dialogue, 172  
 Creole poetry, 163  
*Cribani* (Scribes), 13  
 Cruz, Celia, 3, 26, 173  
 Cuatro, 20  
 Cuba, 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 34, 40, 112, 118, 137  
 Cubanness, 154  
 Cudjoe, Selwyn, 7, 107, 110, 122  
 Cullen, Countee, 1  
 Curaçao, 7
- Damas, Léon Gontron, 3  
 Dance, 10, 16, 39, 41–42  
 Darío, Ruben, 96, 97, 100, 108, 109, 118–19, 141, 163  
*Décima*, 22, 58, 112, 113  
 Decolonization, intellectual, 6  
 Dendera, 11  
*Diablitos*, 13  
*Día de Reyes*, 36  
 Dialect: theory of identification, 96; poetry, 55
- Diop, Cheikh Anta, 151  
 "Dip" rhythm, 48, 58  
 Dominica, 7  
 Dominican Republic, 7. *See also* Merengue  
 "Doo dup" beat, 56  
 Double entendre, 137, 147, 148, 149, 156  
 Duncan, Quince, 72, 94, 123
- Egypt, ancient, 11, 14, 36, 38  
 Ellis, Keith, 4  
 English Creole, 15  
 Esu Elegbara. *See* Lebga  
 Estupiñán Bass, Nelson, 20  
 "Ethnic lynching," 5  
 Eurocentrism, 10, 164, 172, 173  
 Euro-Hispanic, 57  
 Euro-North American, 4  
 Europe, 4, 8, 15
- Fanon, Frantz, 6, 8, 70  
*Favelas*, 120  
 Feet in Spanish verse, 44–45  
 Fernández Retamar, Roberto, 2  
 French, 1, 10, 15, 16  
 French Creole, 15, 35  
 Fruit imagery in Haitian poets, 133  
 Function vs. beauty, 139  
 Futurist poems, Guillén's, 97–98
- Gap, cultural, between colonized and colonizer, 14, 20–21, 32–33, 98  
 Garcia, Philip, 19, 20  
 García Márquez, Gabriel, 2, 14, 17  
 Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., 23, 31, 65–66, 90, 91  
 Goodison, Lorna, 123, 152, 173  
 Grenada, 7, 16  
*Guaguanco*, 9  
 Guillén, Nicolás, poems discussed: "El abuelo," 36, 167; "Acana," 129; "Agua del recuerdo," 136–37; "Las águilas," 84–85; "Al margen de mis libros de estudio," 96–97; "Ana María," 136; "Ángela Davis," 152–53; "El apellido," 36; "Arte poética," 107, 108, 109, 112; "Avisos, mensajes, pregonos," 91, 92; "La balada azul," 108, 141, 142, 143, 169–70; "La balada de los dos abuelos," 57, 113–14, 164–67; "Bares," 61; "Búscate plata," 140; "La canción del bongó," 167; "Canta el sinsonte en el Turquino,"

- 137; "Canto negro," 54-55; "Caña," 113; "Cañaveral," 112-13; "El Caribe," 84; "Chévere," 127; "Cuando yo vine a este mundo," 49, 70-71; "Digo que no soy un hombre puro," 87-90, 149-51, 152, 153; "Dos niños," 168; "Ebano real," 128, 129; "Elegía cubana," 113; "Elegía a Jesús Menéndez," 107, 110, 111, 114-21; "Esclavos europeos," 92, 93; "Hay que tené voluntad," 50-51, 140, 146; "Llegada," 69-70, 127; "Madrigal," 132-36; "Mi chiquita," 141; "Mi patria es dulce por fuera," 49; "Mujer nueva," 130; "Mulata," 47-48, 102-4, 139-40; "Nancy," 153-55; "Negro bembón," 43-44, 45-47; "El negro mar," 137; "No sé por qué piensas tú," 170-71; "Palabras en el trópico," 127; "Palma sola," 134-35; "Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano," 50, 99, 100, 101, 102, 112; "Poema con niños," 168; "Policía," 85-86; "Prólogo" of *La rueda dentada*, 87; "Rosas de elegía," 142, 143; "Rosa tú, melancólica," 144; "Sabás," 104-6; "Se acabó," 49-50; "Sensemayá," 36, 37-38, 54, 57; "Sigue," 49, 140; "Si tú supiera," 140; "Sol de lluvia," 127; "Son número 6," 168; "Son venezolano," 58-59; "Tierra en la sierra y el llano," 58; "Tú no sabe inglés," 77-78; "West Indies, Ltd.," 2, 36, 63, 78-80
- Guyana, 9
- Habanero Sextet, 39
- Hablar en negro de verdad*, 50, 102
- Haiku poems, 133
- Haiti, 5, 7. *See also* Revolution: Haitian
- Harlem Renaissance, 1
- Hausa, 11
- Henderson, Stephen, 23, 31
- Hernández, José, 62
- Hero, 95-124
- Herskovits, Melville J., 9
- Hidalgo Alzamora, Laura, 58
- Hill, Errol, 10, 11, 14
- Hodge, Merle, 150, 155
- Honor (*bonra*), 145-46
- Hoy*, 50
- Hughes, Langston, 1, 23, 32, 33, 59, 78, 102, 104
- Huidobro, Vicente, 1
- Humanization, 110, 126, 130
- Humor: African source, 69; in *son* poem, 72-73; therapeutic, 69, 75, 76-77, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 92, 104
- "Ideales de una raza," 99
- Identity: declaration of, 101; of man and universe, 127; Pan-Caribbean, 7, 26-27
- Identification with masses, 108
- Implied author, 8, 124
- Implied reader, 8, 9
- Intertextuality, 14, 17
- Inventing the text, 6
- Isis, 11, 12
- Jackson, Richard L., 4
- Jahn, Janheinz, 44, 62, 65, 71-72
- Jamaica, 4, 9, 16, 17. *See also* Reggae
- James, C. L. R., 2
- Jes Grew, 6, 35
- Jitanjáfora*, 53, 54, 56, 57, 129, 131
- Kaiso, 9-17 *passim*, 19, 20, 23, 40, 60, 159-60, 172
- Kaisonian as *sonero*, etc., 63
- Kalenda, 11
- Kitchener, Lord, 3
- Knight, Franklin, 7
- Kunene, Mazisi, 23, 31
- Kutzinski, Vera, 4, 35
- Largo*, 45, 58
- Latin America, 1, 2
- Laughter: acknowledges absurdity, 66; as river, 65; in Bantu philosophy, 65; in neo-African cultures, 70, 71-72, 81, 83; insulting, 81-82; vitality of, 83
- Legba, 24, 32, 65, 66, 67
- Légitime Défense*, 96
- Liberation, 6, 96, 156
- Lipski, John M., 12
- Llerena Villalobos, Rito, 9, 14, 17, 21, 144-45
- Loa*, 15, 24, 42, 65, 66, 67
- Love, theme of, 63, 125-26, 138, 142, 147, 148, 153, 154, 155, 170
- McKay, Claude, 1, 3, 134, 135
- Macondo, 17
- Maitre-chant*, 10

- Maitre Kaiso, 35  
 Maloney, Gerardo, 3, 76–77, 94, 122  
 “Mamaguy” (*mamagallar*), 17, 18, 80, 85, 86, 87  
 Manichaeism, 13, 98  
 “Marcha de una Raza, La,” 133  
 Marley, Robert Nestor (Bob), 3, 173  
 Martí, José, 62  
 Martínez Estrada, Ezequiel, 3  
 Martinican popular forms, 60  
 Marxism, 2, 3, 106, 123  
*Mas camps*, 13  
*Mas players*, 12  
 Matamoros Trio, 40  
 Melon, Alfred, 60, 168, 170  
 Menéndez, Jesús, 24–25, 109, 120. *See also* Guillén, Nicolás: “Elegía a Jesús Menéndez”  
 Merengue, 17, 41, 60  
 Messiah, 114  
*Mestizaje*, 5  
 Mestizo, 163  
*Mimic men*, 8, 82  
 Mistral, Gabriela, 1  
 Modernism, 97, 108. *See also* Darío, Rubén  
*Monte*, 129–30  
*Montuno*, 45–46, 57, 58  
 Moré, Beny, 3, 173  
 Morejón, Nancy, 2, 3. *See also* Guillén, Nicolás: “Nancy”  
*Mujer interesada*, 146, 148  
*Mujer nueva*, 25, 125–57  
*Mulatez*, 25, 137, 159–73  
 Mulatto, 69, 98, 136, 137, 169  
*Mundo, El*, 133  
 “My people,” 61, 101, 102  
  
 Naipaul, V. S., 14, 68–69, 159–60  
 Nansi, 67  
 Navarro Tomás, Tomás, 44  
 Négritude, 1, 16, 41, 102, 126, 132  
 Negro-African, 41, 43  
 Negro-American, 43  
*Negro bombón*, 75–76, 139. *See also* Guillén, Nicolás: “Negro bombón”  
 \* *Negros franceses*, 34, 60, 120  
 Neo-African, 2, 4, 22–23, 43, 56, 62, 111, 112, 127  
 Neocolonialism, 95–96, 98, 112  
 Neruda, Pablo, 1  
 New: black poetry, 59; man, 8; natives, 14; negro, 70  
 Nile Valley, 11  
 Nobel Prize, 14, 17  
 Nonsense, 67, 89  
 North American, 4, 17, 50  
*Ntu*, 27  
*Nuestra América*, 100, 120  
  
 Obeso, Candelario, 21–22, 23, 52–53, 120, 146–47  
 Obscenity, 149–51  
 Oral literature, 9, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22–23, 26, 29, 31, 41, 44, 59, 62, 123, 124  
*Orisha*, 24, 116  
 Ortiz, Adalberto, 90  
 Ortiz Fernández, Fernando, 9  
 Oshun, 131, 133  
 Osiris, 11, 12  
 Oya, 133  
  
*Palacios*, 13  
 Palés Matos, Luis, 5, 81–82, 127  
 Panama, 7, 12, 17  
 Pan-Caribbean, 5, 7, 8, 10, 16, 17, 22–24, 26–27, 119, 173  
 Pan-Caribbeanness, 10, 13  
 PaPa LaBas, 32  
 Parody, 90, 91  
 Pascal, Blaise, 65, 161  
 Pedroso, Regino, 34, 131  
 People’s poet, 61, 100, 173  
 Personification, 24, 126  
 Picaro, theme of, 17, 68–69, 146–47, 152, 167  
*Picong*, 68, 78, 83  
*Pie quebrado*, 134  
 Plantation, theme of, 117, 118, 120, 122  
 Platt Amendment, 95  
 Playing, 67  
*Playing mas*, 14, 21  
*Plena*, 9, 41  
*Poesía negroide*, 1  
*Poeta Nacional*, 1, 3, 4, 25–26, 61, 63, 95, 153, 154, 173  
 Popular culture, 9, 16, 17, 23, 29, 44, 52–53, 62, 63, 121, 171  
 Portillo, Rosa, 142, 144  
 Portugal, 12  
 Post-modernism, 96  
 Practical approach, 63, 138, 139, 140, 141, 144–45  
 Praise songs, 124, 138, 153, 154

- Prescott, Laurence E., 21–22, 146, 147  
 Puerto Rico, 5, 9  
 Pyramid text, 36–37
- Race relations, 2, 4, 99, 103, 106, 121, 167–68, 170  
 Radicalization phase, 104–6, 171  
 Ramchand Kenneth, 7, 14  
*Rancho*, 13  
*Redondilla de rimas abrazadas*, 47  
 Reed, Ishmael, 6, 32  
 Reggae, 9, 23, 41  
 Religion: ancient African, 11, 12, 115, 116; Christian, 12, 15, 115, 116, 117; traditional African, 116. *See also Loa*
- Resistance, 107, 110, 122  
 “Reverse discrimination,” 173  
 Revitalization phase, 102–4, 127, 128, 130, 139  
 Revolution, 63, 104, 118–19, 163, 164: Cuban, 50, 118, 137; French, 15; Haitian, 110  
 Rhyming sessions, 31  
 Rhythm, 16, 17, 39, 41, 42, 43, 46, 57, 58, 70, 166, 171  
 Rivers, trope of, 70, 126, 127, 134  
 Rodríguez, Emilio Jorge, 2  
 Rohlehr, Gordon, 9, 10  
 Romance, 48, 171  
 Roumain, Jacques, 3, 5  
*Rumba*, 9, 57, 131  
 Ruscalleda Bercedóniz, Jorge María, 4
- Saint Vincent, 7, 16, 24, 68  
 Salsa, 56  
*Sangre*, trope of, 113, 117  
 Santa Cruz, Nicomedes, 58  
 Sardinha, Dennis, 4  
 Scribal literature, 6, 9, 10  
*Seguidilla compuesta*, 44  
 Self-affirmation, 13, 14, 106, 112, 155  
 Self-annihilation, 13, 14  
 Selvon, Samuel, 14  
 Senghor, Léopold Sédar, 16, 41, 42, 43  
 Shango, 15, 116, 117, 131, 133  
 Signifying. *See* “Mamaguy”  
 “Signifying monkey,” 24, 66, 67  
 Slavery, 10, 109, 110, 117, 122, 165, 172  
 Smartman, 23–24, 65–94, 153, 167  
*Son*, 9, 14, 16, 17, 34, 35, 39, 40, 43, 56–59, 164, 166, 172  
*Sonero*, 23, 63, 93  
*Son* poems, 40, 57, 73–74, 129, 139, 144  
 Spain, 12, 15, 51–52  
 Sparrow, the Mighty, 1, 3, 26, 93, 140, 146, 149, 173  
 Stalin, Black, 26, 101, 101*n*11  
 Steatopygia, 132  
 Steel band, 20  
 Stick fight, 11, 12  
 “Strike up,” 56  
*Surréalité africaine*, 102  
 Sweet talk, 30, 31  
 Swing, 17, 43  
 Switzerland, 12  
 Syncretism, 15, 17, 24, 116–17  
 Synthesizing, 169, 172
- Tambour bambou*, 20  
 Telluric mysticism, 132, 134  
 Thomistic philosophy, 65  
 Tous, Adriana, 4  
 Trickster, 32, 67  
 Trinidad and Tobago, 4, 5, 9–15  
*passim*, 19, 20, 68–69, 172
- UNEAC, 3, 25–26  
*Unité dans la diversité*, *L'*, 42, 45, 60
- Vallejo, César, 1  
*Vallenato*, 9, 14, 17, 19, 20, 21–22, 39, 41, 146, 172  
 Vanguard period, 97, 133  
 Venezuela, 10, 17, 19  
 Ventura, Johnny, 26, 173  
 Verbal rhythm of *son*, 40, 43  
 Vitier, Cintio, 62  
 Vulgarity, 148, 149
- Walcott, Derek, 3, 61  
 Wallis Budge, E. A., 11, 12, 36  
 Warner, Keith Q., 9, 10, 148, 149, 150, 155  
 West Indian, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 56  
 West Indianness, 2, 5, 6  
 Williams, Eric, 2, 5, 6, 7  
 Williams, Lorna V., 4  
 Wilson, Carlos Guillermo, 123  
 Wretched of the earth, 109
- Yard novel, 139  
 Yemaya, 133  
 Yoruba, 15, 116, 168
- Zapata Olivella, Manuel, 116

















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