

The Legacy of Negrismo/Negritude: Inter-American Dialogues

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The beginnings of both cultural and narrative dialogues between Africa and the Americas date back to forced migration through the Middle Passage during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The scattering of Africans from their homeland marked the beginning of the African diaspora, with the resulting transport of not only their physical bodies, but more important, to the culture of survival in the form of music, dance, instruments, and food; languages, religions, myths, and beliefs. The presence and impact of Africans and subsequent generations of Americans of African heritage in these sociocultural spheres soon was evident in the literary production of the Americas. In different texts from the seventeenth century on, writers of the Americas have drawn on the Black figures and interpretations of their culture as sources for poetry, as with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Silvestre de Balboa, Rubén Darío, and Luis Palés Matos; drama and short story, as in texts by Lydia Cabrera; novel, as with *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde, and *Ecué Yamba O* by Alejo Carpentier; and essay, as with Fernando Ortiz's sociohistorical writings. As a result of the influence of post-World War I European artistic movements such as surrealism, interest in African art and culture, as demonstrated by Leo Frobenius's publications on African culture and Apollinaire's African statues in 1917, combined with literary publications like Blaise Cendrars's "Anthologie Nègre" (1921) and Palés Matos's "Danza Negra," the visibility and representation of Black culture reached its highest peak then in the (African) Creole movement called "Negrismo" (Luis 4-5).

Despite the importance in bringing Black culture to the forefront of international consciousness, Negrismo's greatest difficulty lay in the very representation of the Blacks its participants presented. Hitherto, for varied social and economic reasons owing to colonization, Whites manipulated the Black image. Negrismo was no exception. As critics such as Richard Jackson have noted, what was emphasized was oftentimes an exotic representation of Black Latin Americans based more on European models than on a true understanding of the subject (Black Humanism 4). However, with Nicolás Guillén's publication of his collection of poetry entitled *Motivos de Son* in 1930, the object of these literary representations found a voice that motivated the transition to subject and object at once. Particularly in Cuba, because of the greater, yet still problematic incorporation of the Black population into Cuban life, the political problems following the Spanish-American War, and as a response to the European avant-garde, a movement called Afro-Cubanism was born (Jackson, Black Humanism 22). In conjunction with the increasing production of Latin Americans of African descent in other countries in the Americas, the Negrista writing gave way to a revised focus in the Afrocriollo movement characterized by what Jackson has called "Negritud." This movement in Latin America bore a strong resemblance to the Négritude movement of the Francophone Caribbean as led by the intellectuals Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léopold Senghor who, in the 1930s, "promoted black awareness and identity through poetry" (Luis 6). At the same time, as Jackson observes, the development in Latin America was distinct. Jackson states:

To begin with, as a minimum we must acknowledge that the movement had two faces (negrismo and negritud), understand that there was a clear distinction between two concepts, and recognize the often paradoxical roles of the movement's leading participants and indeed of the movement itself, which propagated negative images of blacks while at the same time finding something of value in blackness.

Negrismo, unlike negritud, generated a dilettante image because of its close similarity to European negrophilia or the scholarly and artistic interest shown in the black by Leo Frobenius ... and others (Black Humanism 21)

Negritud, on the other hand, incorporated, as René Dépestre notes, "a conscious and deliberate preoccupation with the destruction of the myths and stereotypes" of Blacks in the Americas (qtd. in Jackson , Black Humanism 26). In this stage of the Afrocriollo movement, Black Latin American writers explored Black life and significant social and cultural issues, thus marking a period where "the black Hispanic for the first time came center stage as author, subject, cultural hero, and as an essential component of new world culture" (Jackson , Black Humanism 31). In referring to Guillén's role as a leading figure of the change of role for Black Latin Americans from the one of object to that of subject of the discourse, and its impact on American culture and literature, I will use Negrismo while recognizing a complementary use of Negritud.

When Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes first met in Cuba in 1931, in the decade following the beginning of the movements of Negrismo (and Negritud) of the 1920s, neither could know the impact of the dialogue that resulted, a friendship and literary rapprochement that would play an important part in the development of the literature and thought of the Diaspora. While Hughes had already begun to establish himself as a well-known poet, especially during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, with a dedication to narrating the lives and spirits of Black people in the United States through his publications in journals such as *The Crisis* and *The New Negro*, along with his publication of collections like *The Weary Blues*, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, and the novel *Not Without Laughter* (Berry 58-63), Guillén was just starting to develop his literary voice, reflecting the lives and concerns of Black Cubans with the imminent release of his seminal publication, *Motivos de Son*. Already he had launched a career that would lead him later to be named the National Poet of Cuba and president of the writers' union UNEAC [National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists]. Both Hughes and Guillén emphasized the symbolic actions of racial affirmation, social criticism, Pan-African/Pan-American vision of cultural and political interaction, and in time, an awareness of the impact of the American government on the lives of African Americans. Although Hughes's love of Spanish American culture had begun years earlier with his travels to Mexico to visit his father at the ages of five and six, and his returns from 1919 to 1921, it is the meeting with Guillén that proved to be the beginning of the culmination of the interest (Jackson , *Cross-Cultural Affinities* 42-43).

Hughes wrote to his friend following a reading:

Man! Your Motivos de Son are stupendous! They are at once very Cuban, and very good....I like them all. 'Ayé me dijeron negro' is marvelous! Also '...si tú supiera,'...And be careful not to write new Motivos too hastily. Give them time to grow inside your heart....But they are so good, the first Motivos, that all the ones that follow will have to be as good, or better. And poems are not written because the public wants them, but because the poet is ready to sing (Hughes 56).

Hughes's admiration of Guillén's work, in particular the thematic incorporation of the Cuban son into poetry, derived in part from his initial input into the creation of the collection. As Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad observes, after reading a few of the early and unpublished poems by Guillén, Hughes suggested that "he [Guillén] should make the rhythms of the Afro-Cuban son, the authentic music of the black masses, central to his poetry, as Hughes himself had done with blues and jazz" (qtd. in Jackson , *Black Humanism* 83).

Hughes's recommendation was significant because of the sociocultural impact of bringing such music into literary discourse. The Cuban son had originated in eastern Cuba, evolving from the guajíro (peasant) and changüí music of the area. In fact, the son had been described as an urbanized changüí, the essence of Cubanness. Owing to a multiethnic blend, the form employed West African, Spanish,

and possibly even American Indian instruments to play it, combining African and Spanish rhythms with topical lyrics of Spanish and West African descent. "That is, the feel of the first part of a son is of Spanish Cuba, and the feel of the montuno is clearly afrocubano. Here is a music that stands for Cuba itself" (Hill 195). Just as Hughes's incorporation of blues and jazz emphasizes the impact of Black culture, collapsing the formal boundaries between literature and music, Guillén's inclusion of the son with oral traditions and Spanish poetic forms promotes the criollo culture championed by Guillén in his works (Jackson , Black Humanism 23).

Hence, both Hughes and Guillén transcended national boundaries as well as formal and disciplinary ones. Their conversations, enhanced by the meetings begun in 1930, increased intellectual dialogues that linked the Americas--North, Central, South, and the Caribbean--through mutual influences of both form and thought. A historical connection for a Pan-American identity already had a firm basis in the Diaspora. In 1844 the poet Plácido had helped lead the *Conspiración de la Escalera* to end slavery. Both the War of Independence from Spain in 1868 and the Spanish American War in 1898 set a tone for global freedom. During the twentieth century, writers like Chester Himes, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, and Frank Yerby made several travels to Latin America and Spain, especially between 1920 and 1950, reflecting the impact of their insights in texts such as Wright's *Pagan Spain* (Jackson , Cross-Cultural Affinities 45-46).

Successive generations of African American writers, such as Amiri Baraka, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Gayle Jones continued the cultural exchanges that stimulated different insights on issues of race, class, gender, and nationality throughout the Americas. Perspectives showed an increased Black identification with Africa and the world, and the influence of the United States on an international scale (Jackson , Cross-Cultural Affinities 46). Without the restriction of the dialogues to English-Spanish contexts, one may certainly recognize the impact of the Brazilian history of slavery and resistance, as embodied by the quilombo Palmares, on the ideology of African American artists. Especially since the 1960s, African American women writers such as Ntozake Shange, Paule Marshall, and Toni Cade Bambara have mined their acquaintance and knowledge of Brazil as well as Lusophone Africa to refine a black consciousness that addresses important questions of gender as well (Jackson , Cross-Cultural Affinities 47).

The continued relationship between the writers and cultures of the Americas serves as a testament to the ongoing necessity critically to reaffirm Black American identity. Just as Hughes and Guillén used the musical traditions of blues, jazz, and son, so the contemporary Afro-Latinamerican musicians have drawn on musical idioms to produce their own Pan-American statements. Such is the case in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Brazil. In Cuba the son has had an impact on the migratory rhythms of salsa, emerging in syncretic form in mostly Puerto Rican barrios of New York City during the 1960s in part because of the embargo on Cuba and the censorship of Cuban music. The musical form has historically served to demonstrate that "salsa's alternative values are reaffirmed as a music tied to the history of the counter-plantation cultures, analogous to Jamaican reggae and African American jazz and from which the Puerto Rican bomba emerged" (Aparicio 81-82). In subsequent generations, these influences have adapted, giving rise to the new wave of Cuban salsa known as timba (Santiago 27). While the rhythmic structures have been modified, the multiplicity of origins and the empowerment of cultural resistance persist. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, and the derivative communities in the United States, national forms such as merengue have merged with musical innovations such as rap to form a new synthesis called merenrap as practiced by groups like Proyecto Uno. The natural blending of musical forms derived mutually from African and Taino rhythms of Native Americans and points to the ways in which musical migrations can serve as vehicles to address complex issues of collectivity, nationality, race, gender, and class while valorizing both African and indigenous cultures. Lastly, in Brazil the innovative works of pioneers of the Tropicalismo movement, such as Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso, coexist with the musical mixture of variously Latin American, Brazilian, and contemporary rhythms (like techno music), as audible in the works of the late Chico Science and Naçãto Zumbi, Carlinhos Brown, Banda Didá Femenina, and Zuco 103, to achieve similar goals of

affirmation, creation, and resistance. Bahia, once a principal slave port, has been a major seat of African Brazilian culture and an important site of the musical innovations, but the musical developments are taking place throughout the country.

The innovations in music certainly help illustrate the legacy of Negrismo. Contemporary scholars and artists subvert the linguistic boundaries of place and identity as a way of emphasizing the individual and communal voice of the Diaspora. Equally important are the boundaries of national and cultural authenticity that exist for good reason. The essays here are ordered according to a contrapuntal structure of the nationally discrete and the Pan-American (hence Pan-African) import on post-colonial projects of African Americans in North America, Mexico, Cuba, and Brazil, beginning with the impact of the earliest oral narratives and ending with a post-colonial look at the liaison between Hughes and Guillén.

The first essay by Paulette Ramsay, "Establishing an Independent Identity: Afro-Mexican Oral Narratives from Jamás fandango al cielo in the Context of Post-Colonial Criticism," advances the oral narratives of the Afro-Mexican to the forefront of Mexican identity through studying the trickster that ruptures binary divisions of two cultural selves. The duality expresses the state of national consciousness in Mexico. Clearly, the trickster is a sign for testing the authenticity of culture and identity.

The following essay by Mario Chandler, "The Reconstruction of Cuban History and Memory in Biografía de un cimarrón," explores an implicit parallel between the historic moment of the text written in the 1960s and various developments for Cuban independence that escalated between 1834 and 1838, and later during the slave uprising of 1844, before an official declaration of sovereignty in 1898. Apparently, there is often still an inability to deal with post-revolutionary racism within a Cuban post-colonial context. Hence, the Diaspora literature of both Cuba and the United States gives voices to a dream deferred. Chandler exposes "hegemonic-based attempts to reconstruct history from the oral testimony of Montejo--who embodies subalternation." Thus, the editorial presence whitens an authentic history into a traditional voice, thereby subverting the Negrismo of the text.

Sueli Meira Liebig, who finds complexities of nationality and history, traces the reasons for the neglect of African Brazilian literature in the theory and critical practice of African Americans. In keeping with the liberation theories of Ramsay and Chandler, she examines the way that African Brazilian writers have written themselves back into the once Eurocentric histories of the New World. By tracing the African Brazilian literary voice from the protest of Black Brazilian poetry of the 1930s on to the late twentieth century, Liebig shows that African Brazilian writers have used their texts to reveal social inequalities hidden by myths of Brazilian racial democracy, balanced with affirmations of African Brazilian culture and literature in what she calls "the privileged link which relates its text in a supra-natural and supra-linguistic dimension" providing Black literature's "primordial point of articulation." Evidently, the point must be grounded in the intellectual history of Pan-African liberation in the Americas.

The last two essays, one each by Belén Rodríguez-Mourelo and Ifeoma Nwanko, return to the literary link: Hughes and Guillén. Rodríguez-Mourelo's essay inquires into the poets' literary experimentations with oral tradition, musical roots, Creole language, and black dialect in order to fashion a Pan-African identity through literary and artistic forms in the Americas. While Hughes validates African heritage in a then segregated culture, according to Rodríguez-Mourelo, Guillén must reclaim an Afro-Hispanic identity from an imposed heterogeneity.

Ifeoma Nwankwo retraces the international link between Guillén and Hughes to explore the complexity between indigenous nègrismo and Pan-American blackness; between, in other words, the Cuban nationality and the African diaspora. Beginning with early texts that reveal the dynamics of

U.S.-Caribbean transracial identities, Nwankwo focuses on Hughes's translation of Guillén's poetry, including the Cuban son in *Cuba Libre*. Here, she observes, is the treatment of national, cultural, and linguistic as "transnational racial collectivism." She concludes that a "transnational Black collective" does not justify the erasure of cultural nuances to achieve "superficial cosmopolitanism." The general, in other words, takes root in the particular, as proposed variously, I think, in the complementary theories of the New Negro (United States), *Négritude* (France and West Africa), and ultimately *Negrismo* (South America). Each philosophy, in its way, either looks forward to or derives from the Black Arts Movement in the United States from 1960 to 1972. The exchanges extend in all directions within and across geographic and linguistic borders, but even boundaries sometimes exist for a reason. To ignore this fact would violate the sacredness of both the self and *Negrismo*.