

The Negrismo Movement in Cuban Poetry (1928–1937)

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Decadent artistic and literary trends in the early decades of the twentieth century were revamped by a revitalizing incursion into diverse manifestations of the African spirit.

André Gide's 1928 travelogues *Viaje al Congo* [Journey to the Congo] and *Regreso de Chad* [Return from Chad], Leo Frobenius's ethnological investigations, Guillaume Apollinar's aesthetic concerns, as well as Paul Morand's story "Magie Noire," made fashionable the topic of blackness. The publication in 1921 of Blaise Cendrars's *Anthologie nègre* [African Folk Tales], René Marzan's *Batoulá*, and the paintings of Picasso, Braques and Derain, contributed to the transformation of blackness into an international trend.

Notwithstanding, these artistic and literary creations "were filled with more or less colorful allusions to the dark race, its customs and legends, African objects and figurines—both authentic and adulterated, which became a decorative element that renewed the ambiance for lovers of exoticism."¹

While under this influence, Cuba was no exception at this time, particularly with regard to its poetry. The poems that were written by Cubans on the island dealing with the subject of blackness were "just simplistic ramblings by white poets who presented blackness via twisted

and onomatopoeic language, rhythm and vocabulary, gestures and pirouettes."²

This tendency, whose intention it was to show the external trappings of blackness, "its picturesque aspects and deformed and musical language,"³ started the *negrismo* movement in Cuban poetry. It purportedly began with a subtle examination of the external attributes of a woman of color, with the poem "La bailadora de rumba" [The Rhumba Dancer] (1928), a poem by Ramón Güirao that was published in the *Diario de la Marina*'s literary supplement. Another 1928 poem, "La rumba" [The Rhumba], by José Zacarías Tallet, published in *Atuei*, descriptively marked the rhythmic explosion that was synthesized by a musical generation, as well as its presence in culture and in Afro-Cuban identity. At the same time, Alejo Carpentier was in Paris writing *Liturgia ñáñiga* [Ñáñigo Liturgy], a work that was later turned into the symphonic poem "Yamba O" by musician and composer Alejandro García Caturla.

Of these three authors, only Güirao continued writing poetry on the subject of blacks. His legacy to us is his anthology *Órbita de la poesía negra afrocubana, 1928-1937* [The Realm of Afro-Cuban Black Poetry].⁴ This book frames the beginning and decline of the *negrista* movement in Cuba.

This trend in Cuban poetry to focus on the external and picturesque characteristics of

blacks does not change even with Nicolás Guillén's poetry (1902-1989). His first poem from the Cuban *negrista* period, "Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador" [Brief Ode to a Black Boxer] (1929) reveals a new path towards racial appreciation, but is not really effective. It does not do much to vindicate the human and spiritual dimension of blacks. However, it does promote a racial feeling that ends up becoming characteristic of his literary work.

Guillén's tone combines irony, sarcasm, and even humor. They come together like an arrow to shoot down the opportunism and superficiality with which Europe made blackness an international fashion, as Guillén says:

*And now that Europe strips naked
To cook its flesh in the sun,
And it looks in Harlem and Havana,
For Jazz and Son,
To look black while it applauds the boulevard
And before the jealousy of whites
Speaks in real black.*

Speaking in black is what Guillén attempted to do in his poetry collection *Motivos de son* (1930), but unlike U.S. poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, and Jamaican poet Claude MacKay, among others, all participants in the so-called Harlem Renaissance (1920-1930), Guillén did not imbue his verses with the direct cry of bodies and souls, the rebellious voice of his black brethren. *Motivos de son* was published on April 20th, 1930, in the "Ideales de una raza" [A Race's Ideals] section of the *Diario de la Marina*. Even if it did reveal poetry with a genuine Cuban accent, it did not delve into the depths of racial discrimination.

The search for social testimony never went beyond the popular level of skin color. The customs, language, and rhythm in these poems served as vehicles for an inner consideration of reality. Scenes of customs that reflected people and lifestyles found in Havana tenement yards

were presented in a racially folkloric manner. The superficial treatment of blackness excluded authenticity: a cry of pain and rebelliousness.

When *Motivos de son* was published, Ramón Vasconcelos wrote: "a poet capable of serious work should not allow the easy, vulgar, and twisted street muse to influence him."⁵ He went on to add: "I know the young poet has many intimate things to say: bitter confidences, redemptive fevers, catapulting admonitions... There are reasons for the *son*, but not reasons for so many, or for so few."⁶

Those short, agile, musical verses by Guillén revealed the essence of the Cuban popular universe. But they never went beyond the darkness of a tenement yard. They also didn't go further than the sound of a drum skin.

Cuban poetry written about blackness between 1929 and 1937 was just rumba and folklore. Perhaps some of those poetic texts managed to immerse themselves in the black soul and not in the trappings of racial discrimination, but they were too few and far between to consider them a real movement.

Many years would have to pass, and many more have yet to go by, for the sense of Cuban blackness, its roots, and its need for space and clamor, to be exposed in a manner that is free of the kinds of restrictions placed on them by museums and environments far from the stridency of a tenement yard.

Notes:

- 1- Augier, Ángel. *Nicolás Guillén. Estudio biográfico-crítico* (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1984): 81.
- 2- Ibidem, 82.
- 3- Bueno, Salvador. *Historia de la literatura cubana* (La Habana: Ministerio de Educación, 1954): 403.
- 4- Güirao, Ramón. *Órbita de la Poesía Afrocaribana, 1928-1937* (La Habana: Úcar, García y Cía., 1938).
- 5- Vasconcelos, Ramón. "Motivos de Son", *El País* (6 de junio de 1930).
- 6- Ibid.