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## Two Terms of the Cuban Counterpoint: Transculturation in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén

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TWO TERMS OF THE CUBAN COUNTERPOINT:  
TRANSCULTURATION IN THE POETRY OF NICOLÁS GUILLÉN

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Honors in the Major Program in Spanish  
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## ABSTRACT

The history of Latin America and the Caribbean was irreversibly altered by the arrival of the conquistadors, destruction of native civilizations and implementation of colonialism for hundreds of years. However, Spain also introduced the high culture of the baroque to Latin America and the Caribbean, which mixed with the cultures of native and African peoples, creating new, distinct forms of literary expression. Subsequent post-colonial cultural movements attempted to explore and reaffirm the variety of cultures that shaped both regions, including the movement of *Afrocolonismo* in Cuba, which occurred from 1910-1940. *Afrocolonismo* was a movement intended to incorporate African folklore and music into traditional modes of art.

While many authors and artists were instrumental to *Afrocolonismo*, Nicolás Guillén is considered to be the most influential author of the movement, due to his new and inventive style of poetry that incorporated both Spanish and African influences. This study will demonstrate how Guillén's use of traditional poetic forms, the *son* and portrayal of everyday Afro-Cuban life reveal his vision for a post-colonial, transcultured Cuban society, rather than a Cuba subject to colonialism and acculturation.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, thank you for your endless love and support. Without you, I would not have the opportunities I have today and for that I am forever grateful.

To Señora Petersen, thank you for sparking my interest in Spanish during high school and encouraging me to continue studying Spanish at UCF.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his book *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benítez Rojo states “The literature that recognizes itself as most Caribbean aspires to fold itself toward that impossible sociocultural unity, in an attempt at annulling the whetted violence inherent in the society from which it emerges” (Benítez-Rojo 125). Nowhere is this attempt more evident than in the work of Cuba’s national poet, Nicolás Guillén. Born in 1902, the year Cuba gained independence, the shadow of Cuba’s colonial history and its struggle to “fold” toward sociocultural unity is evident in his work. Throughout his work, Guillén employs various poetic forms, most notably the *son*, to reflect on themes of imperialism, race, family and slavery in both Cuba and the Caribbean as a whole. An analysis of Guillén’s use of both more traditional poetic forms and the *son* reveal his desire for transculturation and unity, demonstrating that

the *son* and the sonnet are the two opposite but mutually implicated poles of Guillén’s poetry, the two terms in his Cuban counterpoint. In the case of the *son* he needs to impose poetic form on native rhythms, to turn the beat of the bongo into a “song.” In the case of the sonnet, he needs to infuse a traditional form with indigenous vitality, to highlight the ‘son’ in the sonnet. (Pérez-Firmat 325)

In addition to the sonnet, this study will also examine Guillén’s use of the elegy, ode and ballad. Guillén’s use of Afro-Cuban themes in traditional poetic forms and his imposition of structure on the *son* demonstrate his efforts to create transculturation within his work itself and within his nation. By addressing racism, slavery and imperialism within the framework of both traditional poetic forms and the *son*, Guillén universalizes the Afro-Cuban experience, showing not only a desire for a transcultured Cuban society, but also for a transcultured Caribbean society.

## METHODS AND TRANSLATIONS

While this study is written in English, shorter excerpts from Guillén's poems are written in Spanish with English translations and longer excerpts are maintained in their original Spanish. In the endnotes, the full text of every poem analyzed is included, in both English and Spanish, as reference for the reader. When translating poetry from one language to another, much of the meaning is, quite literally, lost in translation. For this reason, this study attempts to maintain as much of Guillén's poetry in its original Spanish as possible. Guillén often employs colloquial language, interjections in other languages such as English or French and literary devices such as metaphors, all of which lose much of their impact when translated to English. Also, this study analyzes not only the meaning of Guillén's poetry, but the structure. Within Guillén's work, there are many important structural elements, including rhyme scheme and the meter of a poem. When translated to English, it is nearly impossible to maintain these structural elements, but the analysis of these elements is a necessary part of this study. Finally, this study analyzes the *son*. The *son* was originally a type of Afro-Cuban music, which Guillén famously employed as a form of poetry. One of the most important elements of the *son* is its rhythm and musicality, but when translated to English these elements are greatly diminished. In addition, while sound adds meaning to the *son* in Guillén's poetry, there also section of the *son* that are sounds without meaning, intended to emulate the sound of chants and instruments. For these reasons, it is necessary to maintain the *son* in Spanish, rather than translate to English in the body of this study.



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to analyze Guillén's work, this study will be conducted based on the literary theories of post-colonialism and transculturation. The term post-colonial can broadly be defined as "the study of colonialism, post colonialism and, more broadly, cultural and political relations between more powerful and less powerful nations and peoples" (Parker 272). As an Afro-Cuban, Guillén's life and work was heavily influenced by Cuba's status as a Spanish colony until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American imperialism in the region, racial tension in Cuba and the internal tension he experienced due to his own mixed racial heritage. Historically, Cuba was a Spanish colony for hundreds of years until Spain's loss of Cuba in the 1898 in the Spanish-American war. Cuba was then under American control from 1899 until gaining formal independence in 1902. However, the Platt Amendment to the Cuban Constitution of 1901 allowed for continued American involvement in the region and under this amendment, the U.S. influence in Cuba, especially in the sugar industry, was evident during Guillén's youth.

In order to fully understand Guillén's work, it is also important to analyze his poetry through the lens of transculturation, a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in his essay *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (*Cuban Counterpoint: Tabaco and Sugar*). In his essay, he states "acculturation is used to describe the process of a transition from one culture to another...I have chosen the word transculturation to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here" (Ortiz 98). Essentially, Ortiz argues that the term acculturation inherently implies the superiority of one culture over another culture, most likely the superiority of the colonizer's culture over the culture of the colonized, who were seen as savage and unenlightened

by colonizers. When discussing the evolution of Cuba as a nation, he explains that transculturation more accurately describes Cuban society than acculturation, as Cuban society has been shaped by many indigenous, European and African cultures. When applying Ortiz's theory to Guillén's work, the process of transculturation and his desire for a transcultured Cuba is evident in his use of both Spanish and African poetic forms and his discussion of everyday Afro-Cuban life. Overall, the use of these two theories in analyzing Guillén's work will situate his work within the socio-political environment of the time and demonstrate the influence of many cultures in Guillén's poetry.

Finally, it is also important to recognize the role Guillén's work played in *Afrourbanismo*. *Afrourbanismo* was "a movement in Caribbean arts and letters that stemmed from a rediscovery of the region's African heritage during the 1920's; to some extent it paralleled the Harlem Renaissance..." (Mullen 2). The goal of *Afrourbanismo* was to change the Euro-centric literary canon and incorporate African influences into both art and literature. *Afrourbanismo* faded by the 1940's, but Guillén is often considered to be the most famous and eminent author of the movement and his *Son Motifs* remain a popular example of Afro-Cuban literature today. While, Guillén did not write exclusively about the Afro-Cuban experience, the influence of *Afrourbanismo* is evident in the vast majority of his work. However, it is important to note that in Guillén's eyes "the Cuban supposes, implicitly implies, the African and Spanish. Nicolas Guillén warned...'nothing is more false, therefore, that the term' Afro-Cuban 'to designate some art, some music or some poetry' " (Morejón 84).

## TRADITIONAL POETIC FORMS AND TRANSCULTURATION

In his work, Guillén employs many different traditional poetic forms, including the sonnet, elegy, ballad and ode. Despite Guillén's popularity as a poet, his work with traditional poetic forms is often overlooked in favor of his later work with the *son*. This emphasis on his later work is supported by critics who argue that "despite his youthful dislike for the Havana Establishment in general...his (Guillén's) early poetic style reflects the 'pure' elitist images of the *modernista* movement" (Kubayanda 2). While the influence of *modernismo* is present in Guillén's earlier work, there are many other elements of his work that represent a definite break with literary conventions at the time, especially his desire for transculturation, which is evident within his early work. When examining Guillén's work through the lens of transculturation, his early work up to "his most recent collections evinces the dialectical development of a single theme-the black tradition-and that his poetry is as a totality an extraordinary, coherent symbolic system (Mullen 116). Essentially, Guillén's later work with the *son* and earlier work within the framework of traditional poetic forms is connected through this single theme, that of the black tradition. This theme can be seen through Guillén's incorporation of African and Caribbean themes into traditionally European structures in his earlier work, which creates transculturation both within the text of his poems and within the artistic structure of his poems. While Guillén's later progression from the use of traditional poetic forms in his earlier work to the use of the *son* also demonstrate his desire for transculturation, his work as whole address problems in both Cuba and Latin America. Common themes throughout his work which highlight his desire for a transcultured, unified Cuba include familial ties, American imperialism and Cuba's history of slavery and colonialism, as seen in the following poems.

### The Sonnet: El abuelo

In the sonnet, “El abuelo” (The Grandfather) from *West Indies Ltd.* (1934), Guillén explores the inner conflict of a woman who is presumably *mulata*, employing a derivation of the syllabic sonnet using a structured rhyme scheme as seen below:

Esta mujer angélica de ojos septentrionales, (A)  
que vive atenta al ritmo de su sangre europea, (B)  
ignora que lo hondo de ese ritmo golpea (B)  
un negro al parche duro de rancos atabales. (A)

Bajo la línea escueta de su nariz aguda, (C)  
la boca, en fino trazo, traza una raya breve, (D)  
y no hay cuervo que manche la solitaria nieve (D)  
de su carne, que fulge temblorosa y desnuda. (C)

¡Ah, mi señora! Mírate las venas misteriosas; (E)  
boga en el agua viva que allá dentro te fluye, (F)  
y ve pasando lirios, nelumbios, lotos, rosas; (E)

que ya verás, inquieta, junto a la fresca orilla (G)  
la dulce sombra oscura del abuelo que huye, (F)  
el que rizó por siempre tu cabeza amarilla. (G)

In the first stanza of the sonnet, the speaker states that the woman “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 (lives attentive to the rhythm of her European blood/ ignoring that in the depth of this rhythm/ an African hits hoarse kettle drums” (3-5). These lines suggest that the woman in the sonnet is a *mulata*, descended from both Spanish and African ancestors. However, her pointed ignorance of her African heritage symbolizes both the domination of her European blood and the domination of Spain over other cultures in Latin America. In the second stanza, this theme continues when the speaker states “no hay cuervo que manche la solitaria nieve/ de su carne (no crow stains the solitary terrain of snow/ of her body)” (7-8). This statement sarcastically implies that the black crow, representative of her African heritage, doesn’t stain her outward appearance, represented by the image of white snow.

However, after the turn or *vuelta* between lines eight and nine, there is a marked shift in the voice of the speaker. In the ninth line the speaker addresses the woman directly for the first time stating “Ah, mi señora! (Oh, my lady!).” He then informs her that she cannot ignore “[a] el que rizó por siempre tu cabeza amarilla (the one who always curled your golden head)” (14). This statement, which ends the sonnet, ironically demonstrates that despite her attempts to ignore her mixed heritage, the woman in the poem bears the genetic mark of her African grandfather as seen by her curled hair. Overall, the woman’s attempt to ignore her heritage and ironic revelation that her appearance makes this impossible to do is symbolic of the issues the speaker sees present in Cuban, and Latin American society as a whole. Despite the fact that the influence of both African and indigenous cultures is evident in post-colonial Cuba and Latin America, for years society has largely attempted to ignore, or even suppress, the presence of African and indigenous

influence in literature, art and society as a whole, up until the 1900's. In the sonnet, it is evident that the speaker, viewing this phenomenon, finds that society as a whole is attempting to suppress their own cultural heritage, which the speaker views as a false moral mistake with serious consequences for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Guillén also comments the mixture of European and African influences in Cuba and Latin America through his modification of the sonnet, a traditionally European form of poetry. Usually, the sonnet employs a rhyme scheme of ABBA, ABBA followed by CDE CDE or CDC DCD and the turn or *vuelta* occurs between the eighth and ninth lines (Navarro Tomás 134). Guillén's use of the sonnet as his basis for the poem, as seen in the rhyme scheme and use of the *vuelta* illustrates the European roots of the poem. However, the change from CDE CDE/ CDC DCD to EFE GFG demonstrates the influence of *modernismo* in the sonnet (Navarro Tomás 135). Also, this sonnet is written as an alexandrine sonnet, used by modernist Latin American poets, with 13 to 15 syllables per line. Finally, the sensual vocabulary of the poem such as "carne, que fulge temblorosa and desnuda (her body, that shines flickering and nude)" (8) and accumulation of descriptive words such as "ve pasando lirios, nelumbios, lotos, rosas (I see in passing, lilies, irises, lotuses, roses)" (11) are clearly ironic references to *modernismo*. While Guillén's work was influenced by *modernismo* and some of its famous figures, such as Rubén Darío, these ironic references are a jibe to the movement. While Guillén knows that his work is influenced by *modernismo*, these ironic references demonstrate his recognition of this fact and create distance between the poet and the poem. Overall while the modification of the rhyme scheme demonstrates Guillén's use of modern and European influences, the use of irony,

sarcasm and content of the sonnet demonstrate that it is also a departure from *modernismo*, ultimately grounding the sonnet in the history of Afro-Cuban culture and *Afrocubanismo*.

### The Elegy: El apellido

Another traditional poetic form, the elegy “began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group” (Academy of American Poets). While Guillén employed the elegy to lament the loss of people, he also used the elegy to reflect on his heritage, as shown in “El Apellido: Elegía Familiar” (The Last Name: A Familiar Elegy) from *Elegías* (1948-58). In “El Apellido”, Guillén uses the three traditional states of grief, praise and consolation, the metaphorical progression of the elegy from day to night and images of family to lament the suffering of his ancestors, but also to celebrate his heritage.

As the elegy opens in its first stage, that of grief, the speaker, who is Guillén, states “desde el alba/...me dijeron mi nombre” (since the dawn, / I have been told my name) (2-5). He then goes on to state in lines 14 to 32,

¿Es mi nombre, estáis ciertos?

Ya conocéis mi sangre navegable

Mi geografía llena de oscuros montes,

De hondos y amargos valles

Que no están en los mapas?

¿Acaso visitasteis mis abismos,

Mis galerías subterráneas

Con grandes piedras húmedas,

Islas sobresaliendo en negras charcas

Y donde un puro chorro  
Siento de antiguas aguas  
Caer desde mi alto corazón  
Con fresco y hondo estrépito  
En un lugar lleno de ardientes árboles,  
Monos equilibristas,  
Loros legisladores y culebras?

In this first section, Guillén opens the elegy at dawn, a metaphorical birth or beginning. He then asks “ya conocéis mi sangre navegable (you must already know my navigable blood)” (16) and employs exotic images of the Caribbean, which calls to mind the image of the conquistador attempting to explore the Caribbean. By using his body as a metaphor for the Caribbean, Guillén connects his last name to the history of Cuba as a Spanish colony and demonstrates that he feels as if society does not fully understand his family’s history of slavery or the history of slavery in the Caribbean. In addition, his question “¿Es mi nombre, estáis ciertos? (Are you sure that’s my name?)” (14) suggests that he thinks that society doesn’t have the right to assign him a last name. To Guillén, the thirteen letters that make up his name are remnant of colonialism, leaving no name that shows his African heritage, which is part of his true nature. Overall, in this section of the elegy, Guillén is grieving for his lost heritage and for society’s ignorance of this heritage.

Between line 44 and 45, there is a break in the elegy, signaling a shift from the stage of grief into the stage of praise and admiration. In this section of the elegy, Guillén defiantly celebrates his heritage, stating

¿No veis estos tambores tensos y golpeados



con dos lágrimas secas?

¿No tengo acaso

un abuelo nocturno

con una gran marca negra

(más negra todavía que la piel)

Una gran marca hecha de un latigazo? (47-53)

While there is still an underlying sense of grief as shown in the image of “tambores tensos y golpeados con dos lágrimas secas (drums, tightened and beaten with two dried-up tears)” (47-48), the overall tone in this section of the elegy is that of restitution. In these lines, Guillén recognizes his “abuelo nocturno” (nocturnal grandfather)” with a “gran marca hecha de un latigazo (great scar made by a whip)” (50-53). This grandfather is symbolic of Guillén’s ancestors who were brought over to Cuba as slaves and the scar from the whip symbolizes the suffering both his grandfather, and slaves as a whole, suffered at the hand of the conquistadors in the New World. Guillén’s recognition of this grandfather demonstrates that he is proud of this side of his heritage, even though it is obscured by his Spanish last name.

In the final stage of the elegy, which begins with line 98, there is a profound sense of consolation and solace. In the opening lines of this section, Guillén states “Siento la noche inmensa gravitar (I feel immense night fall)” (98), demonstrating that the elegy which began with daybreak is now coming to an end. The nightfall is also symbolic of Guillén’s shift in emotions, from the bright emotions of admiration to the darker feelings of consolation and solace. In this section of the poem, Guillén finally comes to terms with the loss of African last

name and his ancestor's suffering, realizing that his last name is an arbitrary reflection of who he really is. This is shown when he states

“De algún país ardiente, perforado  
Por la gran flecha ecuatorial  
Sé que vendrán lejanos primos,  
remota angustia mía disparada en el viento;” (105-08)

In these lines, Guillén suggests that he believes his African family, represented by the “lejanos primos” (distant cousins)” (107), will someday come to know him, even though he lost his African last name, a loss that he lamented deeply in the first section of the elegy. Despite never knowing this family, he states

Sin conocernos nos reconoceremos en el hambre,  
En la tuberculosis y en la sífilis  
en el sudor comprado en bolsa negra,  
en los fragmentos de cadenas  
adheridos todavía a la piel;” (113-17)

These lines demonstrate that Guillén has come to the realization that despite the pain his ancestors endured, this sense of shared suffering creates a familial bond between all who are descended from African slaves, regardless of their ancestral heritage. Following these lines he states “¿Qué ha de importar entonces/...ay! mi pequeño nombre/ de trece letras blancas? (What can it matter, then/...ah my little name/ of thirteen letters?)” (123-26). This shows that, to Guillén, his name is now merely a formality. To him, his sense of affinity with his ancestors and understanding of his ancestor's suffering is far more important than his last name.

### The Ballad: Balada de los dos abuelos

Ballads originated in the European folk tradition and were often accompanied by musical instruments (American Academy of Poets). They usually dealt with themes of religion, love, tragedy, domestic crimes, and sometimes even political propaganda (American Academy of Poets). In “Balada de los dos abuelos” (Ballad of the Two Grandfathers) from *West Indies Ltd.* (1934), Guillén uses the form of the ballad to show the inner conflict the speaker faces as his white grandfather and black grandfather speak to him. In the opening lines, the speaker describes his two grandfathers, creating distinct images of both when he states:

Me escoltan mis dos abuelos  
Lanza con punta de hueso,  
tambor de cuero y madera:  
mi abuelo negro.  
Gorguera en el cuello ancho,  
gris armadura guerrera:  
mi abuelo blanco. (2-8)

In these lines, the speaker presents two very distinct images of his grandfathers. While he is far removed from the original slaves the Spanish brought to Cuba and the conquistadors, he presents his African grandfather as one of the first slaves in Cuba and his white grandfather as a conquistador. This creates a blurring of time within the ballad, bringing the speaker closer to his ancestors from hundreds of years ago. In addition to bringing the speaker even closer to his ancestry, this temporal shift also makes the reunion of his two grandfathers at the end of the ballad even more poignant. This reunion is seen in the following lines:

Yo los junto.

—¡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. (47-57)

The reunion of the two grandfathers, whom the speaker brings together, shows the resolution of the conflict within himself. The union also demonstrates that a process of transculturation has taken place in the poem within the speaker and within Cuba as a whole. As they reunite the speaker states “Los dos del mismo tamaño/ ansia negra y ansia blanca” (both of equal size, a black longing, a white longing)” (52-53). The equal size and emotions of the two grandfathers, one a slave and one a conquistador, metaphorically shows the resolution of the inequality between the two. In addition, this image demonstrates how they came together to create a new being, namely the speaker of the poem. While this reunion and resolution of inequality between the two men may seem idealistic, it demonstrates Guillén’s desire for transculturation and recognition of the equality of African and Spanish culture in Cuba, within both individuals and society as a whole.

### The Ode: Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador

Originally from the Greek word *aeiden*, the ode is a “generalized as a formal address to an event, a person, or a thing not present” (American Academy of Poets). While originally used by the Greeks, Romantic poets later used the ode to “convey their strongest sentiments” (American Academy of Poets). In “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador Cubano” (Small Ode to a Cuban Boxer) from *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931), Guillén addresses an boxer, who is presumably Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo (Kid Chocolate) to explore his strong feelings on the subjects of imperialism and the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. As the ode opens, the boxer’s opponent is the North, and Guillén states:

El Norte es fiero y rudo, boxeador...

Ese mismo Broadway

Es el que estira su hocico con una enorme lengua húmeda,

Para lamer glotonamente

Toda la sangre de nuestro cañaveral. (1-17)

In these lines, Broadway symbolizes the North while the boxer is symbolic of Cuba. The representation of the North as a gluttonous animal clearly demonstrates Guillén’s disapproval of US imperialism, especially in regard to Cuba’s sugar plantations. These opening lines seem to warn the boxer that his opponent that his opponent is very formidable and are essentially Guillén’s warning to Cuba. Guillén goes on to state

En realidad acaso no necesites otra cosa,

porque como seguramente pensaras,

ya tienes tu lugar.

Es bueno, fin y al cabo,  
Hallar un *punching bag*,  
Eliminar la grasa bajo el sol.  
saltar,  
sudar... (31-39)

In these lines, Guillén presents a highly stereotypical image of an African man, leaping and sweating beneath the sun. However, the tone of line “en realidad acaso no necesites otra cosa” (In truth, perhaps that’s all you need)” (31), is highly sarcastic, suggesting that Guillén disapproves of this stereotype, as it presents Africans in a way suggests they are animalistic and simple. Essentially, Guillén is warning this boxer, and Cuba as a whole, not to play into stereotypes for the sake of benefitting from US influence in the region. In addition, Guillén interjects English phrases throughout the poem. In this lines above the interjection of the English phrase “punching bag” is very jarring, and is symbolic of how Guillén views the US presence in Cuba: as unwelcome and unsettling.

At the end of the poem, Guillén states “Y ahora que Europa se desnuda/ para tostar su carne al sol/...lucirse negro mientras aplaude el bulevar! (so now that Europe strips itself/ to brown its hide beneath the sun/...the Negro reigns while boulevards applaud!” (45-49). This is a notable shift from the rest of the ode and it contrasts very sharply with the previous sections, which warn against the dangers of imperialism and US presence in Cuba. Due to this contrast, the phrase is very satirical, suggesting that Guillén is wary of the US and Europe’s effort to “brown its hide” and that “the Negro reigns.” The previous warnings in the ode suggest that Guillén believes no good will come of imperialism in Cuba and that despite what Cubans may

think, the US is exerting influence over Cuba to the point that they are really the reigning power in the country. The use of the ode as a formalized address allows Guillén to separate himself from these strong feelings, but it is evident that he has many concerns about imperialism and the presence of the US in Cuba.

## THE SON AND TRANSCULTURATION

While Guillén employed many different poetic forms, he is most famous for his use of the *son*, “an Afro-American music, one of many hybrids, the origins of which are obscure. It has African and European roots and was played by and for blacks” (Robbins 182). As his career progressed, Guillén moved away from using traditional poetic forms toward the *son*, transforming it from song into poetry. However, this shift was not without controversy due to the societal implications that surrounded the *son*, as explained below.

Affiliation with *soneros* (those who play *son*) follows both racial and education lines. In general, musicians are more likely to describe themselves as “*sonero*” when they are black and have a limited degree of postsecondary music education. Better-educated black musicians might say that the *son* is ‘in their blood,’ but do not like to describe themselves as contained by one genre; white or mulatto musicians are more likely to declare a fondness for *música cubana* than *son* and also reject the *sonero* label. (Robbins 195)

Despite drawing criticism for his use of the *son*, Guillén’s use of the *son* in his work demonstrates his belief that the *son* was an authentic, legitimate form of poetry, equal to other traditional European forms. His use of the *son* was also incredibly important to *Afrocubanismo* as it truly incorporated an African element of Cuban society, the *son*, into popular literature and mainstream society. This incorporation, despite drawing criticism, can be seen as an act of transculturation, because it incorporated a traditionally African form of music, the *son*, into Cuban literature. In addition, in the poems ““Si tú supiera” (If You Know) from *Motivos de Son* (1930), La canción del Bongó” (The Song of the Bongo) from *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931) and “Sensemayá” from *West Indies Ltd.* (1934), Guillén uses the form of the *son* to discuss topics



that are closely related to his African roots and employs colloquial language and African chants and rituals. These elements draw his work even further away from traditional literary norms and into uncharted territory. Overall, Guillén's representation of the *son* in poetry and use of the *son* to discuss the African presence in Cuban society were truly revolutionary actions that had a lasting impact on Cuban poetry and literature.

### Si tú supieras

“Si tú supieras”, published in 1930 in *Motivos de Son*, is the most simplistic of the three *sons*. It opens with a man lamenting over a woman, saying “¡Ay negra! / si tú supiera/ Anoche te bi pasá,/ y no quise que me biera./ A é tú le hará como a mí (last night I saw you pass, I didn't want you to see me. You will do the same to him as you did to me)” (3-5). In this lines, the use of “bi” in place of “vi” demonstrate how Guillén employs language that is considered to be “full of phonetic and grammatical deformities” (Duarte 862) but is in reality closer to the black Cuban form of expression than the more formal language usually employed in poetry. The use of this language elevates the legitimacy of this language and makes it a legitimate form of expression, despite the fact that it was not considered “proper Spanish.” The *son* then moves into a highly rhythmic refrain, as seen below:

Sóngoro cosongo,  
songo be;  
sóngoro cosongo  
de mamey;  
sóngoro la negra  
baila bien;

sóngoro de uno,

sóngoro de tré. (9-16)

Like the early sons, this section of the poem “consists of a single section made by repeating a short harmonic/rhythmic cycle” (Robbins 190). When read aloud, this section is highly rhythmic calling to mind the sound of bongo drums, an instrument commonly used in sons. Of the three sons, this son is the most simplistic because it deals with a man’s heartbreak rather than a political theme. However, its musicality and simplicity demonstrates that Guillén’s poetry is becoming influenced by the *son* rather than traditional poetic forms. In addition, his use of Spanish with phonetic and grammatical modification that is commonly associated with improper Spanish also show that Guillén is moving away from the traditional language used in poetry, as the avant-garde movements had done since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this respect, it is important to remember that this movement away from traditional language was possible due to avant-garde movements, especially French cubism which helped validate the importance of the African culture in art and literature. However, Guillén translated this validation into a Cuban and Latin American context through his use of the *son* as a poetic form.

### La canción del Bongó

“La canción del Bongó”, written in 1931, is less simplistic than “Sóngoro Cosongo” and explores race relations and transculturation in Cuba, demonstrating that Guillén is now using the *son* to explore complex topics. In this *son*, which is written from the point of view of a bongo drum, the speaker urges unity in Cuba stating “pero mi profunda voz,/ convoca al negro y al blanco,/ que bailan el mismo son (my deep voice,/ calls to both black and white,/ who dance to the same son)” (7-10). This statement reveals that Guillén envisions a Cuba that is not divided

based on racial and class lines. These lines also demonstrate that “the bongo drum in its function as the humble voice of the poem and of the people is able to project a future where it is decisively included” (“Caribbean Identity and Integration”, Ellis 2).

In addition to calling for unity within society, the speaker also suggests that the earth of Cuba itself has undergone transculturation, but still fails to recognize its African ancestry stating “en esta tierra,/ mulata de africano y español/...siempre se falta algún abuelo (in this *mulata* earth,/ of African and Spanish/...there is always a grandfather missing)” (16-20). The grandfather, which frequently serves as a symbol for African heritage in Guillén’s work, is missing in this *son* because Cuban society refuses to recognize the important role African’s have played in shaping the nation of Cuba. Despite the fact that the earth itself is both African and Spanish, transculturation cannot truly take place until this missing grandfather is found. Further on in the *son*, the speaker adopts a forgiving and hopeful attitude stating

Habrá quien llegue a insultarme,  
pero no de corazón,  
habrá quien me escupa en público,  
cuando a solas me besó...

A ese, le digo

-Compadre

Ya me pedirás perdón (30-36)

In these lines, the speaker acknowledges that they will always face insults and people will pretend to look down on them in public. These lines also demonstrate that the bongo drum is representative of the *son* itself, which was often looked down upon as a lesser form of music or

art. Overall, this *son* is a celebration of transculturation and conveys Guillén's optimism and hope for his vision of a Cuban society wherein Cuba's African and Spanish roots are celebrated equally.

### Sensemaya

"Sensemaya", deals with the more universal and political topics: imperialism and slavery. The son opens with the musical refrain of "mayobombe-bombe-mayobombe!" (1), which alternates with the action throughout the poem. In Lucumí (also known as Yorùbá) culture, this chant "reveals promptly, describing in meticulous detail, the physical traits and morals, the evil intentions of someone" (Cabrera 22). The use of this African refrain situates the son within African-Cuban culture, and the snake becomes representative of the oppressor, whose evil intentions that speaker hopes to reveal through *mayobombero*. In addition, the grounding of this *son* in symbolic African culture implies that the oppressor is both imperialism and colonialism. The *mayobombero* asks the snake-goddess for permission to kill, since this religion is natural and primordial and as such "all is one", meaning that life is respected and permission is needed to take life away.

As the son continues, "the two main themes...represent the two (symbolic) opposing forces, these being Man (good) and the Snake (evil), which confront each other in the poem" (Zohn-Muldoon). This confrontation between the man and his oppressor is seen when the narrator states "Tú le das con el hacha y se muere (You give it the hatchet and it dies)" (15). Through killing the snake, the man has representatively killed his oppressor, escaping from slavery and imperialism. Also, through chanting the refrain, the participants in the poem come home to protect themselves from slavery. Overall, the use of this musical refrain shows the African

influence on the poem, the use of the son shows the Cuban influence on the poem, and the two cultures combine to create a distinctly Afro-Cuban work.

## RESPONSE TO ANTICIPATED CRITICISMS

While Guillén was instrumental in the movement of *Afrocubanismo*, his work has drawn criticism from many sides, which can be divided into three main groups: Hispanophile whites, middle class Afro-Cubans and those who dismiss Guillén's work due to his political views. The first main group who criticized Guillén were Hispanophile whites who "found embracing Afro-Cuban culture heretical" (West-Durán 969). Not only did this group find embracing Afro-Cuban culture heretical, they also disapproved of transculturation, as it assumed equality between the Spanish and African elements of Cuban society. Essentially, their objections to Guillén are based on their rejection of the notion that Cuban society was formed by both Spanish and African influences, even though it is evident that both cultures have had a strong influence on Cuban culture and society.

The second group of critics were "some African-Cuban professionals and the middle classes who belonged to some of the Afro-Cuban...(who) attacked Guillén or distanced themselves from some of his more plebian subject matter and language" (West-Durán 969). These Afro-Cubans often felt that Guillén's subject matter was too plebian or that his emphasis on Cuba's africanity created separation, not unity within Cuban society. However, Guillén's work, based in *Afrocubanismo*, was intended to show that the African contribution to Cuban society needed to be recognized. In addition, his discussion of Afro-Cuban life in Cuba was showed that "the problems affecting other parts of the Caribbean are the same problems that are affecting Cuba and they must be dealt with in...solidarity" ("Guillén at Seventy", Ellis 89). While Guillén's work often focused on mundane, daily events, these events were not plebian. Rather, these events demonstrated the universality of the problems affecting Afro-Cubans,

ranging from heartbreak to imperialism. Guillén's depiction of these events were intended to demonstrate that, in his eyes, all were equal in Cuban society.

Finally, a third group criticized Guillén for his political views and designation as a long-time communist and Cuban's national poet under Fidel Castro. In his later works, beginning with *West Indies Ltd.* In 1934, Guillén "came to adopt the view that with the overthrow of imperialism all these evils would be abolished in a Marxist society" ("Guillén at Seventy", Ellis 90), a view that was unpopular with many. However, this study will focus on Guillén's earlier work and the poetic value of this work, rather than a discussion on the validity of his political views.

These socio-political criticisms, external to the poetry itself, often deterred those who attempted to approach Guillén's from a technical point of view. Technically, Guillén was a highly accomplished poet and his manipulation of traditional techniques demonstrates his mastery of this knowledge. However, many criticized his departure from technical poetic norms, due in part to the influence of external socio-political pressures, passing off his poems, especially those which used the form of the *son*, as lacking in technique and skill. However, close examination of Guillén's poetry clearly demonstrates his mastery of poetic techniques and his use of the *son* as a poetic form is now widely considered to be his most original and important impact in the field of literature.

## CONCLUSION

In his work, from the sonnet to the *son*, Guillén passionately advocates for a Cuba free of imperialism, discrimination, racial prejudices and social boundaries, systems whose origins are rooted in Cuba's colonial past. In addition, the poems explored in this study demonstrate Guillén's efforts to resolve his inner conflicts between his Spanish and African roots. This conflict is highlighted in the recurring theme of the grandfather, a figure who is far enough removed to separate Guillén from the horrors of slavery and imperialistic actions of the conquistadors, but close enough to connect Guillén to his heritage. Despite this inner conflict, Guillén's work is a celebration of transculturation, and his poetry clearly advocates for social and racial unity within Cuba. During Guillén's life,

the official culture of the 20th century inherited the fear of blacks, and for decades the African side of the Cuban family was harassed and marginalized as if it were a sign of barbarity of which we should not only feel ashamed but should repent...the 1930s saw the black man released from his imprisonment as new form of expression were molded with a national sheen, putting their stamp on art and literature that took the African component as a starting assumption. (Morejón and Frye 93)

Due to his discussion of the importance of the influence of African culture on Cuba within traditional poetic forms and incorporation of the *son* into his work, Guillén was integral to the creation of these new forms of expression, releasing the black man for his figurative "imprisonment." In addition, despite being criticized for his work and political beliefs, Guillén's poetry truly sheds light on Cuba's struggle to come to terms with its colonial past and Guillén's optimistic vision for a Cuba in which no one culture or race is considered to be superior. Overall,



by addressing his inner struggle with racism, slavery and imperialism within the framework of both traditional poetics forms and the *son*, Guillén truly universalizes the Afro-Cuban experience, showing not only a desire for a transcultured Cuban society but a desire for a world in which discrimination and division is replaced with understanding and unity.

Outside of this socio-political context, Guillén's achievements within the field of literature, most notably his technical manipulation of both traditional forms of poetry and the *son* demonstrate his deep understanding of the importance of the technical aspects of poetry. While Guillén's poems are often full of social commentary based on his life experience, it is important to balance interpretation of this commentary with an understanding and respect for Guillén's mastery and manipulation of the structure of poetry itself and this impact of this achievement in the field of literature. Overall, Guillén's accomplishments within the field of literature and within the socio-political environment of Latin America and the Caribbean are evident and his poetry truly shows his deep understanding of poetry, Cuban society and the rich, but often turbulent history of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## APENDIX A

### **El Abuelo**

Esta mujer angélica de ojos septentrionales,  
que vive atenta al ritmo de su sangre europea,  
ignora que lo hondo de ese ritmo golpea  
un negro al parche duro de roncós atabales.

Bajo la línea escueta de su nariz aguda,  
la boca, en fino trazo, traza una raya breve,  
y no hay cuervo que manche la solitaria nieve  
de su carne, que fulge temblorosa y desnuda.

¡Ah, mi señora! Mírate las venas misteriosas;  
boga en el agua viva que allá dentro te fluye,  
y ve pasando lirios, nelumbios, lotos, rosas;

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.

## **The Grandfather**

Translation by Alanna Fulk

This angelic woman with septentrional eyes,  
that lives attentive to the rhythm of her European blood,  
ignoring that in the depth of this rhythm  
an African hits hoarse kettledrums.

Under the plain line of her hawk-like nose,  
the mouth, in a fine stroke, traces a short line,  
and no crow stains the terrain of snow  
of her body, that shines flickering and nude.

Oh, my lady! Look at the mysterious veins;  
flowing in the living water that courses in you,  
and see in passing, lilies, irises, lotuses, roses;

that already seem uneasy along the refreshing shore  
the sweet shadow obscures the grandfather who flees,  
the one who always curled your golden head.

## El Apellido

I

Desde la escuela  
Y aún antes... Desde el alba, cuando apenas  
Era una brizna yo de sueño y llanto,  
Desde entonces,  
Me dijeron mi nombre. Un santo y seña  
Para poder hablar con las estrellas.  
Tú te llamas, te llamarás...  
Y luego me entregaron  
Esto que veis escrito en mi tarjeta,  
Esto que pongo al pie de mis poemas:  
Las trece letras  
Que llevo a cuestas por la calle,  
Que siempre van conmigo a todas partes.  
¿Es mi nombre, estáis ciertos?  
¿Tenéis todas mis señas?  
¿Ya conocéis mi sangre navegable,  
Mi geografía llena de oscuros montes,  
De hondos y amargos valles  
Que no están en los mapas?  
¿Acaso visitasteis mis abismos,  
Mis galerías subterráneas  
Con grandes piedras húmedas,  
Islas sobresaliendo en negras charcas  
Y donde un puro chorro  
Siento de antiguas aguas  
Caer desde mi alto corazón  
Con fresco y hondo estrépito  
En un lugar lleno de ardientes árboles,  
Monos equilibristas,  
Loros legisladores y culebras?  
¿Toda mi piel (debí decir),  
Toda mi piel viene de aquella estatua  
De mármol español? ¿También mi voz de espanto,  
El duro grito de mi garganta? ¿Vienen de allá  
Todos mis huesos? ¿Mis raíces y las raíces

De mis raíces y además  
Estas ramas oscuras movidas por los sueños  
Y estas flores abiertas en mi frente  
Y esta savia que amarga mi corteza?  
¿Estáis seguros?  
¿No hay nada más que eso que habéis escrito,  
Que eso que habéis sellado  
Con un sello de cólera?  
(¡Oh, debí haber preguntado!)

Y bien, ahora os pregunto:  
¿No veis estos tambores en mis ojos?  
¿No veis estos tambores tensos y golpeados  
Con dos lágrimas secas?  
¿No tengo acaso  
Un abuelo nocturno  
Con una gran marca negra  
(Más negra todavía que la piel),  
Una gran marca hecha de un latigazo?  
¿No tengo pues  
Un abuelo mandinga, congo, dahomeyano?  
¿Cómo se llama? ¡Oh, sí, decidmelo!  
¿Andrés? ¿Francisco? ¿Amable?  
¿Cómo decís Andrés en Congo?  
¿Cómo habéis dicho siempre  
Francisco en dahomeyano?  
En mandiga ¿cómo se dice Amable?  
¿O no? ¿Eran, pues, otros nombres?  
¡El apellido, entonces?  
¿Sabéis mi otro apellido, el que me viene  
De aquella tierra enorme, el apellido  
Sangriento y capturado, que pasó sobre el mar  
Entre cadenas, que pasó entre cadenas sobre el mar?  
¡Ah, no podéis recordarlo!  
Lo habéis disuelto en tinta inmemorial.  
Lo habéis robado a un pobre negro indefenso.  
Lo escondisteis, creyendo  
Que iba a bajar los ojos yo de la vergüenza.

¡Gracias!  
¡Os lo agradezco!  
¡Gentiles gentes, thank you!  
Merci!  
Merci bien!  
Merci beaucoup!  
Pero no... ¿Podéis creerlo? No.  
Yo estoy limpio.  
Brilla mi voz como un metal recién pulido.  
Mirad mi escudo: tiene un baobab,  
Tiene un rinoceronte y una lanza.  
Yo soy también el nieto,  
Biznieto,  
Tataranieto de un esclavo.  
(Que se avergüence el amo)  
¿Seré Yelofe?  
¿Nicolás Yelofe, acaso?  
¿O Nicolás Bakongo?  
¿Tal vez Guillén Banguila?  
¿O Kumbá?  
¿Quizá Guillén Kumbá?  
¿O kongué?  
¿Pudiera ser Guillén Kongué?  
¡Oh, quién lo sabe!  
¡Qué enigma entre las aguas!

II  
Siento la noche inmensa gravitar  
Sobre profundas bestias,  
Sobre inocentes almas castigadas;  
Pero también sobre voces en punta,  
Que despojan al cielo de sus soles,  
Los más duros,  
Para condecorar la sangre combatiente.  
De algún país ardiente, perforado  
Por la gran flecha ecuatorial,  
Sé que vendrán lejanos primos,  
Remota angustia mía disparada en el viento;

Sé que vendrán pedazos de mis venas,  
Sangre remota mía,  
Con duro pie aplastando las hierbas asustadas;  
Sé que vendrán hombres de vidas verdes,  
Remota selva mía,  
Con su dolor abierto en cruz y el pecho en llamas.  
Sin conocernos nos reconoceremos en el hambre,  
En la tuberculosis y en la sífilis,  
En el sudor comprado en bolsa negra,  
En los fragmentos de cadenas  
Adheridos todavía a la piel;  
Sin conocernos nos reconoceremos  
En los ojos cargados de sueños  
Y hasta en los insultos como piedras  
Que nos escupen cada día  
Los cuadrumanos de la tinta y el papel.  
¿Qué ha de importar entonces  
(¡Qué ha de importar ahora!)  
¡Ay! mi pequeño nombre  
De trece letras blancas?  
¡Ni el mandinga, bantú,  
Yoruba, dahomeyano  
Nombre del triste abuelo ahogado  
En tinta de notario?  
¿Qué importa, amigos puros?  
¡Oh, sí, puros amigos,  
Venid a ver mi nombre!  
Mi nombre interminable,  
Hecho de interminables nombres;  
El nombre mío, ajeno,  
Libre y mío, ajeno y vuestro,  
Ajeno y libre como el aire.

## **My Last Name**

Translation by Roberto Márquez and David Arthur McMurray, from *Man-Making Words*

Ever since school,  
And even before...from dawn, when I was  
barely a pacht of sleep and wailing,  
since then  
I have been told my name. A password  
that I might speak with stars.  
Your name is, you shall be called...  
and then they handed me  
this you see here written on my card,  
this I put at the foot of all poems:  
thirteen letters  
that I carry on my shoulders through the street,  
that are with me always, no matter where I go.  
Are you sure this is my name?  
Have you got all my particulars?  
Do you already know my navigable blood,  
my geography full of dark mountains,  
of deep and bitter valleys  
that are not on the maps?  
Perhaps you have visited my chasms,  
my subterranean galleries  
with great moist rocks,  
islands jutting out of black puddles,  
where I feel the pure rush  
of ancient waters  
falling from my proud heart  
with a sound that's fresh and deep  
to a place of flaming trees,  
acrobatic monkeys,  
legislative parrots and snakes?  
Does all my skin (I should have said),  
Does all my skin come from that Spanish marble?  
My frightening voice too,  
the harsh cry in my throat?  
Are all my bones from there?



My roots and the roots  
of my roots and also  
these dark branches swayed by dreams  
and these flowers blooming on my forehead  
and this sap embittering my bark?  
Are you certain?  
Is there nothing more than this that you have written,  
Than this which you have stamped  
with the seal of anger?  
(Oh, I should I have asked!)

Well then, I ask you now:  
Don't you see these drums in my eyes?  
Don't you see these drums, tightened and  
beaten with two dried-up tears?  
Don't I have, perhaps,  
a nocturnal grandfather  
with a great black scar  
(darker still than his skin)  
a great scar made by a whip?  
Have I not, then,  
a grandfather who's Mandingo, Dahoman, Congolese?  
What is his name? Oh, yes, give me his name!  
Andrés? Francisco? Amable?  
How do you say Andrés in Congolese?  
Have you always said Francisco in Dahoman?  
In Mandingo, how do you say Amable?  
No? Were they, then, other names?  
The last name then!  
Do you know my other last name, the one that comes  
to me from that enormous land, the captured,  
bloody last name, that came across the sea  
in chains, which came in chains across the sea.

Ah, you can't remember it!  
You have dissolved it in immemorial ink.  
You stole it, from a poor, defenseless Black.  
You hid it, thinking that I would

lower my eyes in shame.  
Thank you!  
I am grateful to you!  
Noble people, thanks!

*Merci!*

*Merci bien!*

*Merci beaucoup!*

But no...Can you believe it? No.

I am clean.

My voice sparkles like newly polished metal.

Look at my shield: it has a baobab,

It has a rhinoceros and a spear.

I am also the grandson,

great grandson,

great great grandson of a slave.

(Let the master be ashamed.)

Am I Yelofe?

Nicolás Yelofe, perhaps?

Or Nicolás Bakongo?

Maybe Guillén Banguila?

Or Kumbá?

Perhaps Guillén Kumbá?

Or Kongué?

Could I be Guillén Kongué?

Oh, who knows!

What a riddle in the waters!

## II

I feel immense night fall

on profound beasts,

on innocent castigated souls;

but also on ready voices,

which steals suns from the sky,

the brightest suns,

to decorate combatant blood.

From some flaming land pierced through

by the great equatorial arrow,

I know there will come distant cousins,  
my ancestral anguish cast upon the winds;  
I know there will come portions of my veins,  
my ancestral blood,  
with calloused feet bending frightened grasses;  
I know there will come men whose lives are green,  
my ancestral jungle,  
with their pain open like a cross and their breasts red with flames.  
Having never met, we will know each other by the hunger,  
by the tuberculosis and syphilis,  
by the sweat bought in a black market,  
by the fragments of chain  
still clinging to the skin;  
Having never met we will know each other  
by the dream-full eyes  
and even by the rock-hard insults  
the quadrumanes of ink and paper  
spit at us each day.  
What can it matter, then  
(What does it matter now!)  
ah, my little name  
of thirteen letters?  
Or the Mandingo, Bantu,  
Yoruba, Dahoman name  
of the sad grandfather drowned  
in notary's ink.  
Good friends, what does it matter?  
Oh, yes, good friends  
come look at my name!  
My name without end,  
made up of endless names;  
My name, foreign,  
free and mine, foreign and yours,  
foreign and free as the air.

## Pequeño Oda a un Negro Boxeador

Tus guantes  
puestos en la punta de tu cuerpo de ardilla,  
y el punch de tu sonrisa.

El Norte es fiero y rudo, boxeador.  
Ese mismo Broadway,  
que en actitud de vena se desangra  
para chillar junto a los *rings*  
en que tú saltas como un moderno mono elástico,  
sin el resorte de las sogas.  
ni los almohadones del *clinch*;  
ese mismo Broadway  
que unta de asombro su boca de melón  
ante tus puños explosivos  
y tus actuales zapatos de charol;  
ese mismo Broadway,  
es el que estira su hocico con una enorme lengua húmeda,  
para lamer glotonamente  
toda la sangre de nuestro cañaveral.

De seguro que tú  
no vivirás al tanto de ciertas cosas nuestras,  
ni de ciertas cosas de allá,  
porque el *training* es duro y el músculo traidor,  
y hay que estar hecho un toro,  
como dices alegremente, para que el golpe duela más.

Tu inglés,  
un poco más precario que tu endeble español,  
sólo te ha de servir para entender sobre la lona  
cuanto en su verde slang  
mascan las mandíbulas de los que tú derrumbas  
*jab a jab*.

En realidad acaso no necesitas otra cosa,  
porque como seguramente pensarás,

ya tienes tu lugar.

Es bueno, al fin y al cabo,  
hallar un *punching bag*,  
eliminar la grasa bajo el sol,  
saltar,  
sudar,  
nadar,  
y de la suiza al *shadow boxing*,  
de la ducha al comedor,  
salir pulido, fino, fuerte,  
como un bastón recién labrado  
con agresividades de *black jack*.

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.

### **Small Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer**

Translation by Roberto Márquez and David Arthur McMurray, from *Man-Making Words*

Your gloves  
Cocked before a squirrel-quick body  
and the punch in your smile!

Boxer, the North is hard and cruel.  
The very Broadway  
that like a vein bleeds out  
to scream beside the ring  
wherein you bound, a brand new rubber moneky,  
without resorting to the ropes  
or the cushions of a clinch...  
the very Broadway  
that oils it melon-mouth with fear  
before your fists of dynamite  
and stylish patent leather shoes...  
is the same Broadway  
that stretches its snout, its moist enormous tounge,  
to lick and glut upon  
our canefields' vital blood!

It's clear  
you're not aware of certain things down here,  
nor of certain things up there;  
for training is tough, muscle a traitor,  
and one must gain-you say with joy  
-a bull-like strength, to make the punch hurt more.

Your English,  
only a bit more shaky than your feeble Spanish,  
is good enough inside the ring  
for you to understand that filthy slang  
spit from the jaws of those you waste  
jab by jab.

In truth, perhaps that's all you need.  
And, as you certainly will think,  
you've got it made.

For after all, it's great  
to find a punching bag,  
work of some fat beneath the sun-  
to leap,  
to sweat,  
to swim-  
and from shadow-boxing to a fight,  
from the shower to the table,  
come out polished, fine and strong,  
like a newly-crafted cane  
with the aggressiveness of a black jack.

So now that Europe strips itself  
to brown its hide beneath the sun  
and seeks in Harlem and Havana  
jazz and *son*:  
the Negro reigns while boulevards applaud!  
Let the envy of the whites  
know proud, authentic black!

## **Balada de los dos abuelos**

Sombras que sólo yo veo,  
me escoltan mis dos abuelos.

Lanza con punta de hueso,  
tambor de cuero y madera:  
mi abuelo negro.  
Gorguera en el cuello ancho,  
gris armadura guerrera:  
mi abuelo blanco.

Pie desnudo, torso pétreo  
los de mi negro;  
pupilas de vidrio antártico  
las de mi blanco.

África de selvas húmedas  
y de gordos gongos sordos...  
—¡Me muero!  
(Dice mi abuelo negro).  
Aguaprieta de caimanes,  
verdes mañanas de cocos...  
—¡Me canso!  
(Dice mi abuelo blanco).  
Oh velas de amargo viento,  
galeón ardiendo en oro...  
—¡Me muero!  
(Dice mi abuelo negro.)  
¡Oh costas de cuello virgen  
engañadas de abalorios...!  
—¡Me canso!  
(Dice mi abuelo blanco.)  
¡Oh puro sol repujado,  
preso en el aro del trópico;  
oh luna redonda y limpia  
sobre el sueño de los monos!



¡Qué de barcos, qué de barcos!  
¡Qué de negros, qué de negros!  
¡Qué largo fulgor de cañas!  
¡Qué látigo el del negrero!  
Piedra de llanto y de sangre,  
venas y ojos entreabiertos,  
y madrugadas vacías,  
y atardeceres de ingenio,  
y una gran voz, fuerte voz,  
despedazando el silencio.  
¡Qué de barcos, qué de barcos,  
qué de negros!

Sombras que sólo yo veo,  
me escoltan mis dos abuelos.

Don Federico me grita  
y Taita Facundo calla;  
los dos en la noche sueñan  
y andan, andan.  
Yo los junto.

—¡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!

### **Ballad of the Two Grandfathers**

Translation by Roberto Márquez and David Arthur McMurray, from *Man-Making Words*

Shadows by which only I see,  
I'm watched by my two grandfathers.  
A bone-point lance,  
a drum of hide and wood:  
my black grandfather.  
A ruff on a broad neck,  
a warriors gray armament:  
my white grandfather.

Africa's humid jungles  
With thick and muted gongs  
"I'm dying!"  
(My black grandfather says).  
Waters dark with alligators,  
mornings green with coconuts...  
"I'm tired!"  
(My white grandfather says).  
Oh sails of a bitter wind,  
galleon burning for gold...  
"I'm dying"  
(My black grandfather says).  
Oh coasts with virgin necks  
Deceived with bead of glass...!  
"I'm tired!"  
(My white grandfather says).  
Oh pure and burnished sun,  
imprisoned in the tropic's ring;  
Oh clear and rounded moon  
above the sleep of monkeys!

So many ships, so many ships!  
So many Blacks, so many Blacks!  
So much resplendent cane!  
How harsh the trader's whip!  
A rock of tears and blood,

of veins and eyes half-open,  
of empty dawns  
and plantation sunsets,  
and a great voice, a strong voice,  
splitting the silence.  
So many ships, so many ships,  
so many Blacks!

Shadows which only I see,  
I'm watched by my two grandfathers.

Don Frederico yells at me  
and Taita Facundo is silent;  
both dreaming in the night  
and walking, walking.  
I bring them together.

                    "Frederico!  
Facundo!" They embrace.  
They sigh. Both  
raise their sturdy heads;  
both of equal size.  
beneath the high stars;  
both of equal size,  
they scream, dream, weep, sing.  
They dream, weep, sing.  
They weep, sing.  
Sing!

## **Si tú supieras**

Ay, negra  
si tú supiera!  
Anoche te bi pasá  
y no quise que me biera.  
A é tú le hará como a mí,  
que cuando no tube plata  
te corrite de bachata,  
sin acoddadte de mí.  
Sóngoro cosongo,  
sogo be;  
sóngoro cosongo  
de mamey;  
sóngoro, la negra  
baila bien;  
sóngoro de uno  
sóngoro de tre.  
Aé,  
bengan a be;  
aé,  
bamo pa be;  
bengan, sóngoro cosongo,  
sóngoro cosongo de mamey!

## **If You Knew**

Translation by Alanna Fulk

Ay, black  
if you knew!  
Last night I saw you pass,  
and I did not want you to see me.  
You will do the same to him as you did to me  
When I didn't have money  
You ran to dance the bachata  
without thinking of me.  
*Sóngoro cosongo,*  
*sogo be;*  
*sóngoro cosongo*  
*de mamey;*  
*sóngoro*, the black  
dances well;  
*sóngoro* of one  
*sóngoro* of three.  
*Aé,*  
bengan a be;  
*aé,*  
bamo pa be;  
bengan, *sóngoro cosongo*,  
*sóngoro cosongo de mamey!*

## La canción del bongo

Esta es la canción del bongó:

—Aquí el que más fino sea,  
responde, si llamo yo.

Unos dicen: Ahora mismo,  
otros dicen: Allá voy.

Pero mi repique bronco,  
pero mi profunda voz,  
convoca al negro y al blanco,  
que bailan el mismo son,  
cueripardos y almiprietos  
más de sangre que de sol,  
pues quien por fuera no es de noche,  
por dentro ya oscureció.

Aquí el que más fino sea,  
responde, si llamo yo.

En esta tierra, mulata  
de africano y español  
(Santa Bárbara de un lado,  
del otro lado, Changó),  
siempre falta algún abuelo,  
cuando no sobra algún Don  
y hay títulos de Castilla  
con parientes en Bondó:  
Vale más callarse, amigos,  
y no menear la cuestión,  
porque venimos de lejos,  
y andamos de dos en dos.  
Aquí el que más fino sea,  
responde si llamo yo.

Habrà quién llegue a insultarme,  
pero no de corazón;  
habrá quién me escupa en público,  
cuando a solas me besó...  
A ése, le digo:

—Compadre,  
ya me pedirás perdón,  
ya comerás de mi ajiaco,  
ya me darás la razón,  
ya me golpearás el cuero,  
ya bailarás a mi voz,  
ya pasearemos del brazo,  
ya estarás donde yo estoy:  
ya vendrás de abajo arriba,  
¡que aquí el más alto soy yo!

## The Song of the Bongo

Translation by Alanna Fulk

This is the song of the bongos  
— Here may be the finest there is,  
that responds, if I call.  
Some say: right now  
others say: I am coming.  
But my hoarse call,  
My deep voice,  
summons the black and the white,  
who dance the same *son*,  
*cueripardos* and *almiprietos*  
more of blood than sun,  
since for those outside it isn't night,  
for those inside it is already dark.  
Here may be the finest there is,  
that responds, if I call.

In this *mulata* earth  
of African and Spanish  
(Santa Barbara on one side,  
on the other, Chango),  
always missing some grandfather,  
when no conquistador is left  
and there are nobles of Castilla  
with parents in Bondó:  
it is better to say nothing, friends,  
and not agitate the question,  
because we come from far away,  
and we walk two by two.

Here may be the finest there is,  
that responds, if I call.

There will be someone who comes to insult me,  
but not from the heart;  
There will be someone who spits on me in public,  
when alone together we kissed...



To this, I say:

    Friend,  
you will ask my forgiveness,  
you will eat from my *ajiacjo*,  
and will give me reason,  
and you will hit my skin,  
and you will dance to my voice,  
and we will stroll arm in arm,  
and you will be where I am:  
and you will arrive from below  
because the highest is me!

## **Sensemaya**

*Canto para matar a una culebra.*

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

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

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

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

Tú le das con el hacha y se muere:  
¡dale ya!  
¡No le des con el pie, que te muerde,  
no le des con el pie, que se va!

Sensemaya, la culebra,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, con sus ojos,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, con su lengua,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, con su boca,  
sensemaya.

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.

¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, la culebra...*  
¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, no se mueve...*  
¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, la culebra...*  
¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, se murió.*

**Sensemaya**

*Song to Kill a Serpent*

Translation by Alanna Fulk

Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!

Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!

Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!

The serpent has eyes of glass;  
The serpent comes and becomes entangled on a stick  
With its eyes of glass, in a stick,  
With its eyes of glass.

The serpent walks without legs  
the serpent hides in the grass,  
walking it hides in the grass,  
walking without legs.

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

You give it the hatchet and it dies:  
Do it!  
To not kick with your foot, it will bite you,  
Do not kick with your, you should go!

Sensemaya, the serpent,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, with its eyes,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, with its language,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, with its mouth,  
sensemaya.

The dead serpent cannot eat,  
the dead serpent cannot hiss,  
cannot walk  
cannot run.

The dead snake cannot look,  
the dead snake cannot drink  
cannot breath  
cannot bite.

Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, the serpent...*  
Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, it does not move...*  
Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, the serpent...*  
Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!  
*Sensemaya, it died.*

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