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African Cultural Identity in the Hispanic Caribbean: An Examination of Negrismo
through the Works of Cuban Poet Nicolás Guillén

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades numerous publications of Latin American literature have encapsulated and captured the experiences and cultural identity of the Afro-Hispanic population in Latin America. The rise of Afro-Hispanic poetry and revolutionary literary movements such as Negrismo, have allowed the contemporary reader of Spanish American literature to accept and celebrate the emergence of unique Afrocentric elements and components of Hispanic literary works as being a central force in shaping modern day Caribbean literature. Given the central role Cuba played in the development of Afro-Hispanic literature, poetry, the renegotiating and integration of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Hispanic identity in literature, this paper seeks to examine the *negrista* poetry of Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén, delving into elements that highlight the Negrismo literary and cultural movement that establish concepts of Afro-Hispanic identity in the Spanish speaking Caribbean. It also aims to examine the reinterpretations of Afro-Hispanic cultural identity, “Cubanness” and the African influence present in Nicolás Guillén’s poetry.

Key Words: Afro-Hispanic, Afro-Cuban, Negrismo, Nicolás Guillén, *Motivos de Son*, *Songoro Cosongo*, female identity, *negrista*

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The concept of identity is one that is complex, understood through a multidisciplinary approach involving multitudinous fields of study and perspectives. Identity may be defined as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (Merriam-Webster). Perceived as a social construct, it was originally derived from a psychological perspective during the 1950s, however, contemporary definitions of identity capture every day and social science contexts (Fearon 1999).

According to Dr. Nicole Roberts of The University of the West Indies “identity in the Caribbean remains a perplexing issue”, she further states that, “in the Hispanic Caribbean, the issue is even more complex” (2007). The complexity of ‘Caribbeanness’ is one that is rooted within the Caribbean itself and the Caribbean people, as belonging to the region, any sense of identity “can only be determined by themselves” (Roberts 2007). The Hispanic Caribbean, after decades of slavery has been overshadowed by its colonial past, involving a capitalist system that sought political and economic expansion at the expense of the cultural integrity of the people. As such, Caribbean literary intellectuals were faced with redefining and validating the cultural identity of the region, particularly the conceptualization “blackness” in the Hispanic Caribbean.

The search for identity within the Caribbean has traversed decades of research, literature and varied scholastic evaluations post African colonization. Ideas about Caribbean identity have often been obscured by concepts of language, regional and historical identity that place Caribbean people into simple homogenized groups rather than identifying and examining in depth nuances of cultural evolution within Caribbean societies. Despite its complicated and unclear nature, it plays a significant role in past and contemporary literary creations within the Caribbean. Literary

scholars sought to “engage in the process of renegotiating Afro-Caribbean cultural identity” (Badiane 18), thereby documenting instances of the so-called “black struggle” within the Americas. As attested by Richard Jackson, “Afro-Hispanic literature is emerging on many fronts and in many guises and its emergence coincides with the arrival to prominence of such key terminology as canonicity and Afrocentricity” (2002).

Afro-Hispanic literature seeks to embody, reclaim and celebrate the culture and identity of a systematically disenfranchised people through black literary expression (Jackson 2002). The literary works of writers had already constituted of black themes, particularly those of Cuban authors. Authors such as José Zacarias Tallet (1893-1989), Ramón Guirao (1908-1949), Emilio Ballagas (1908-1954) and Nicolás Guillén (1902-1986) gave rise to the Negrismo literary and cultural movement that sought to employ African rhythms and elements to highlight the experiences that encapsulate the identity of the black Cuban population (Badiane 11-12). According to Mamadou Badiane “the birth of Negrismo - in the Caribbean allows for the rethinking of Caribbean identity. Negrismo inaugurated a kind of cultural revolution, one embraced by its creators but rejected by its detractors” (1). Many critics have regarded the emergence of *negrista* poetry as a period that comprised the act of “black disentanglement” (Badiane 3) from dominant literature of American and European writers or ethnic awareness.

Rationale

In recent years, Afro-Hispanic studies and literature have been part of an emerging field in academics, aiming to evaluate and preserve concepts of Afro-Caribbean identity that have been seamlessly and carefully integrated into the works of Caribbean authors, explicitly reflecting “Caribbeanness” thematically and linguistically. To understand the cultural revolution that is Afro-

Hispanic identity in the Caribbean, it is important to understand, examine and enhance what is fundamentally responsible for the continuous formation and shaping of cultures and identities in the region. Furthermore, as a student, based in the Caribbean and pursuing studies in Spanish language at the tertiary level, certain preoccupations have presented itself in relation to the study, portrayal and representation of the Afro-Hispanic perspective in Spanish literature. Given the remarkable literary and scholarly contributions of Cuban poet and journalist, Nicolás Guillén, to the Negrismo cultural and literary movement and his realistic documentation and depiction of black history, it is indisputably important to examine his interpretation of social and economic contentions of the Afro-descendent community in the Hispanic Caribbean.

Objectives

Through the examination of particular collections of literary works of world-renowned Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén, one is able to understand, evaluate and examine the reimagining and redefining of Afro-Hispanic cultural identity in the Hispanic Caribbean, particularly through the social and economic contentions typically addressed by the Negrismo literary and cultural movement. This research paper will examine and analyse the concept of Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo through the poetry of Nicolás Guillén and will consist of four chapters:

- Literature Review
- Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo in *Motivos de Son*
- Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo in *Songoro Cosongo*
- Afro-Hispanic female identity in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén.

This paper particularly seeks to generate renewed interpretations and perceptions of Afro-Hispanic cultural identity and examine and analyse the theme of Negrismo in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén.

METHODOLOGY

This research project is a literary study examining and evaluating the *negrista* poetry of Cuban poet and journalist, Nicolás Guillén. Given the nature of the study, secondary documentary sources were used, including books, collections of poetry, translations, dissertations, research papers and scholarly journal articles. Print documents were sourced at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Alma Jordan Library. Online documents were sourced through the U.W.I. Libraries Information Connexion (UWILinc), the Google search engine and the Google Scholar search engine. Information sources range within the period 1960-2010, thus providing a wide spectrum of information, some of which correspond with the life and publications of the poet. Popular authors of the *negrista* literary movement were also used in this study including Nancy Morejón, Cuban author of the anthology series, “*Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén*”, Ian Smart, Ángel Augier, Emily Maguire and Keith Ellis. However, considering the limited research surrounding the poet’s literary works, particularly those examining the portrayal of the Afro-Hispanic female, many of the sources used in this research project cited each other’s work, notwithstanding, varying point-of-views were generated by each author.

CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

The Evolution of Afro-Hispanic Cultural Identity in the Caribbean

Transculturation, ‘Caribbeanness’ and Literature

Transculturation, a term often used in anthropology, saw its inception through in the widely recognised work *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, published in 1940 (Côté). It was introduced by Ortiz to understand and analyse the development of Cuban society, culture and identity in relation to tobacco and sugar as being representative of a fusion of elements of varying and diverse cultural entities that have progressively evolved historically and culturally, creating Cuba’s cultural identity in contemporary society. Alan West-Durán states:

Transculturation signifies constant interaction, transmutation between two or more cultural components, whose unconscious end is the creation of a third cultural whole that is, culture new and independent, although its roots rest on preceding elements. - No element is superimposed on the other; on the contrary, each one becomes a third entity (967).

Transculturation is evidently present within both the Cuban and regional context. Namely, cultural identity within the Hispanic Caribbean emphasises cultural similarities based on preceding cultural elements that are constantly interacting. It is a cultural interconnectedness where no one cultural identity is perceived as being dominant, rather, one may note the blurring of cultural lines, such that new “transmuted” cultures and cultural identities are formed. However, due to its complexity and unique development, the concept of “Caribbeanness” is ever changing and in constant evolution based on social interactions and experiences. According to West-Durán:

Transculturation assumes that identity is something that is evolving constantly, often over vast historical periods. It is not a smooth process, nor a violence-free cultural theme park (Stam and Shohat); the process can stall, be interrupted, unfold haltingly, be incomplete, or simply fail. Transculturation is characterized by displacements, dislocations, and retrenchments. (968)

Furthermore, it is reflected in Caribbean literature. In his works, Nicolás Guillén inherently seeks to redefine, reformulate and rediscover what is Cuban identity. Guillén sees it as racial, cultural and social mixing, he seeks to introduce African or ‘black’ elements into a society that has historically been seen as *mestizaje*, a process often criticized for racially, culturally and socially whitening the people within a society. Thus, his works are often Afrocentric. As transculturation has suggested of the Caribbean cultural identity, his works have also evolved to reflect the cultural evolution of Cuba and the Hispanic Caribbean.

Negrismo

The twentieth century saw a rise in *negrista* poetry in the Caribbean, a new literary creation that began in Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, ending in the conceptualization of a new literary movement contemporarily known as Negrismo (Badiane 99). Prior to the conception of Negrismo as a literary movement, the rumba period was influential, playing a significant role in Afro-Hispanic Caribbean literature. A musical genre that was more “African sounding” with “African-derived rhythms” (Badiane 100-101), the rumba was used in the development of Afro-Caribbean literature, particularly in the aforementioned countries. It is an Afro-Cuban rhythm combining percussion, songs and dances that reflect Caribbean culture, affirming the writer’s “independence from European artistic creations” (Badiane 100). The rumba period is

representative of a progressive rethinking of cultural identity within a largely transcultural and multicultural society. Furthermore, *negrista* poetry sought to recognize the experiences of Afro-descendent people in the Hispanic Caribbean, shedding light on cultural elements that had been progressively and systematically eradicated.

Negrismo emerged in the Hispanic Caribbean, mainly in poetry, between 1926 and 1940 as a literary and cultural movement, a collaboration between literary creation and culturally, racially and socially centred criticisms. It is an artistic movement that represents and emphasizes the marginalization and exploitation of the minority. According to Monica Mansóur:

Its purpose, in parallel to indigenismo, was to recuperate the roots and traditions of countries with a large black population in order to redefine their national identity. Europe at the time was calling into question the hierarchical vision of a rational Western ‘civilization’ and a more intuitive and sensual ‘primitive world’. In the arts, this questioning was reflected in avant-garde movements and in a renewed search for identity. (2004)

Negrismo is seen as being essential in defining Caribbean and Latin American identity. It is a literary canon that aimed to revive talks surrounding miscegenation, a concept that has been significant in the conceptualization of this literary canon and the ideologies surrounding it. Its establishment through literary characteristics representative of the era saw the re-evaluation of “blackness” as a central part of national and cultural identity.

Negrismo as a literary canon was most evident in poetic creations that characteristically used images that celebrated African culture and identity. Afro-descendent women were used as symbols of sensuality. Negrista poets expressed historical and socio-political issues “through images that were highly original in their sensuality and synaesthesia, like the fusion of fruits,

colours, textures, tastes, scents, climate, vegetation, the parts of the human body and the forms and sounds of musical instruments, all of them specific to Latin America” (Mansour 2004). The poetry of Negrismo was concerned with the re-evaluation of ‘black’ customs and traditions and its integration into a region that was culturally, racially and socially complex. It was also concerned with examining the issues and experiences of a marginalized society rejecting the exploitation and oppression of people that were the main subject of its poetry.

Negrista poetry emulated the stylisation of Spanish poetry but employed the rhythms of Afro-American music, thus recreating the hybridized forms of popular music such as the son, rumba and guaguancó among others. It utilised repetition, onomatopoeia and African originated words that were representative of African music. The main exponents of the Negrismo cultural and literary movement include Nicolás Guillén, Emilio Ballagas, Luis Palés Matos, Ildefonso Pereda Valdés and Nicomedes Santa Cruz.

The Works of Cuban Poet and Author Nicolás Guillén

Nicolás Guillén

Nicolás Cristóbal Guillén Batista is considered the *griot* of Negrismo by the high literary quality he has achieved in his body of literary works, “renegotiating Afro-Caribbean cultural identity” (Badiane 18). His work embodied a patriotic and anti-imperialist element, chronicling the turbulent historical experiences of his native land while celebrating and affirming the black Cuban experience. It rejected and protested the exploitation and injustices of imperialism, racism and capitalism. In 1961, he was recognised as the national poet by Cuba’s then political leader, Fidel Castro.

Nicolás Guillén was born on July 10, 1902 in Camagüey, Cuba. He was the son of Nicolás Guillén y Urrea and Argelia Batista y Arrieta. His parents were descendants of Africans and Spaniards and were well established in Camagüey (Ellis 51). His father was a newspaper editor who later became one of the leaders of the National Liberal Party (El Partido Liberal Nacional). In 1908, he was elected senator when the party won elections (Badiane 18). He was assassinated on November 1, 1916 during political conflicts between the Liberals and Conservatives on the eve of national elections. The loss of his father profoundly impacted his political outlook and literary works (Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature). Guillén started authoring poems in 1916 and later started to attain prominence in 1919 after his poems appeared in the *Camagüey Grafico*, he later left to study Law at the University of Havana. He returned to Camagüey in 1922 with the intention of restarting his literary career, however he turned to journalism due to emerging financial concerns. Guillén relocated to Havana after General Gerardo Machado gained power in 1925.

In 1927, Guillén saw a resurgence in his literary work which he recognized as being due to his journalistic collaborations with *Diario de la Marina*, where he published *Motivos de Son* (*Motifs of Son*) on April 20, 1930 (Badiane 19). This opened a literary window for Guillén that allowed him to assimilate African or ‘black’ culture into Cuba’s conceptualization of national identity, creating the foundation for a hybrid nation (Badiane 20). Nicolás Guillén’s social consciousness expanded in his production of *Songoro Cosongo* in 1931. He strived to reflect Cuban identity by addressing its history and racial composition. In 1934 he published *West Indies Ltd.* expressing his anti-imperialist and revolutionary ideologies (Castilla 66).

In *Conversation with Nicolás Guillén* (*Conversación con Nicolás Guillén*), Guillén himself cites a series of events that have profoundly impacted his life and his works. These include the

death of his father in 1917, the fall of Machado in 1933, the Revolution and his involvement in the Communist Party (51). Guillén's political involvement played a significant role in his literary creations, particularly in the production of *West Indies Ltd* (1934) in which he explicitly expresses his discord and frustrations toward the happenings surrounding the Revolution of the 1930s. He travelled to Spain after becoming a member of the Communist Party to cover the civil war for *Mediodia* and participate in an international antifascist writers' conference (Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature). In 1937 he wrote *Spain: A Poem in Four Anguishes* and *Hope and Songs for Soldiers* and *Sones for Tourists*. Guillén spent several years in exile in Paris during the dictatorship of Batista. In 1958 he newly published a series of poems and elegies in Buenos Aires, *The Dove of Popular Flight* (*La paloma de vuelo popular*) and *Elegias*, these poems were largely political and Latin-American (Castilla 68). He returned to his homeland in 1959 after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, becoming actively involved in the cause. In 1964 he wrote *Tengo* (*I Have*) a verse collection that celebrated Cuba's revolutionary triumph. He also wrote *Poemas de amor* (*Love poems*) during this time.

Among his other works he wrote *El Gran Zoo* (*The Great Zoo* 1967) *Hasty Prose*, 1929–1972 (1972), a three-volume collection of his journalistic accomplishments and *The Daily Diary* (1972), a compilation of his literary works.

In 1981 he received Cuba's highest honour, the Order of José Martí. He also became a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. Nicolás Guillén later died in 1989 due to illness at age 87. His poetry continues to be viewed as revolutionary in the conceptualization of Cuban cultural and national identity and the affirmation of African culture and tradition as being integral in the Hispanic Caribbean.

The Poetry of Nicolás Guillén

Nicolás Guillén's poetry has been widely examined regionally and internationally, often being critically related to Cuba's social and political life. Diverse and expressive, Guillén's poetry reflects various periods and eras in Cuban history. According to Keith Ellis (1983), his works have been "constant in revealing his preoccupation with raising the quality of life in his native Cuba and changeable in their diversity of expressive forms". Guillén's poetry has been classified as *poesía negrista*, *poesía negroide*, *poesía negra*, *poesía afrocubana* and *poesía de la descolonización* and has provoked a variety of criticisms over the years. According to Mary Castan De Pontrelli:

The poetry of Nicolás Guillén represents the first manifestation of a literary criollo poetry in Cuba. The term criollo indicates those cultures which are autochthonous to each of the countries of Hispanic America, formed by the fusion of the cosmopolitan Spanish civilization with Indian or with African cultures. In the case of Cuba, Its Indigenous culture is the result of the confluence of Spanish civilization with a number of African cultures. Guillén's poetry is reflective of a combination of avant-garde and modernist poetic stylizations. It is valued for its contributions to Afrocentric literary movements, incorporating the Afro-Cuban rhythms and different African characteristics such as musicality, vocabulary and folklore (Mascia 2003). However, Guillén himself has referred to his poetry as *poesía mulata* (Jiménez Romero 2007), reflective of his own complex racial ancestry. According to H. R. Hays, Guillén is well-known for his fusion of European and African cultural elements in the production of his literary works, "a combination of technical sophistication and primitive emotion" used as a form of protest and indictment against the social, racial, political and economic situation in his native Cuba and the aspirations of people without rights. It sought to profile Cuban society and express the formulation of a country's own culture and the substance of its identity through the manifestation

of socio-economic conditions and the slow process of assimilation and transculturation (Guillén and Augier 1974).

Guillén's poetry is well-known for its musicality. By integrating the Cuban Son into his literature, Guillén formulated an invisible link between the two dominant races in Cuba, creating a new national identity that recognised the island as a mestizo nation (Badiane 23). The Cuban Son, a genre predominantly practiced within the lower-class population of Cuba, is a distinct musical sound and rhythm that embodied the mestizo culture of the island, particularly Afro-Cuban cultural elements. According to Ángel Augier:

El son, danza cálida nacida del encuentro negri blanco bajo la luz antillana, y que en la música y la palabra del pueblo culminan en canción, fue intuitivo por Guillén como una de las formas que podía revestir una poesía distintiva, que no en vano es la música popular el arranque poderoso de toda gran tradición lírica de acento nacional. Producto artístico del mestizaje - de las dos razas que en las venas de la población isleña - el son da a plenitud en la forma como en el contenido, algunos de los acentos fundamentales de nuestro carácter.

(142)

Guillén's son poems recognised the distinctive "Criollo" rhythms of African origin as being integral in the conceptualization of nationality and cultural identity of his people. The son poems sought to reclaim the uniqueness of the people, bringing it to light in the form of a powerful literary and poetic element (Augier 143). Despite the progressive evolution of Guillén's poetry in reference to its poetic style, political ideology and social perspective, Guillén managed to conserve its essential characteristics and the Creole rhythm of the Son (Augier 144), from the laments of Cuban society in *Motivos de son* (1930) and *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931) to the Caribbean perspectives present in *West Indies Ltd.* (1934). However, researchers and critics alike have failed to adequately

examine the poet's portrayal of female figures in his works as literature surrounding the Afro-Hispanic female figure has proven to be quite limited.

Acknowledged as the national poet, his works dramatized the problems of Caribbean people in a memorable and realistic way that allowed it to receive global acclamation. His poetry can be said to be a form of social commentary through which he reclaimed his own identity and the identity of the Afro-Hispanic population in the Caribbean.

CHAPTER TWO

Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo in “Motivos de Son”

The Son

As an influential element in Nicolás Guillén’s literary work, it is necessary to understand the cultural evolution of the Cuban Son as a musical form. The *son* was originally referred to a type of dance song representative of Cuban oral literary traditions, which later gained nationwide popularity in Cuba during the 1920s (Smart 353). The first known *son* “El son de Ma Teodora” (“Ma Teodora’s Son”) dates back to the late sixteenth and was described as containing some degree of African influence (Smart 353). Over time, the *son* underwent an evolution, becoming an amalgam of Spanish melody and African rhythm (Pontrelli 111). It was enriched by the black lower-class sectors in Havana becoming detached from conservative society that predominantly employed Spanish cultural traditions (Pontrelli 112). As its popularity grew, it became a product of transculturated African and European elements, converting into a mulatto genre of music and dance. The *son* became an influential element and factor in *negrista* and Afro-Cuban poetry, from which Guillén developed the *poema son*, which “achieves all its fullest rhythmic qualities when read aloud” (Smart 355).

Analysis

Motivos de Son which incorporates eight poems, was first published on 20 April 1930 in Cuban newspaper *Diario de la Marina* on the page entitled “Ideales de una Raza” (Ellis 63), marking it a day of historical relevance in Cuban literature. The collection of poems was received with both popular and unpopular criticism by readers. It embodied the culturally unique characteristics of Cuba, encompassing elements of Cuban national and cultural identity through

Guillén's vivid poetic expression. According to Ramón Vasconcelos, "Están bien, porque hay en ellos sabor folklórico, criollo, afrocubano, del patio; sabor a guanábana, a mamey, a mojo agrio, a ron. Están bien porque son el producto espontáneo de la tierra natal, todo atavismo, sensualidad y sol a plomo" (243). Emily Maguire states that Guillén's *Motivos de Son* establishes "a cultural specificity" where the "mixing of oral and written traditions, European stylistics, and local linguistic patterns results in a newly transculturated product". Maguire refers to this collection of poems as a "hybridization of high-culture literary style with similar popular linguistic and narrative styles to augment existing elements of word-play, improvisation and humour already available in language production in the Caribbean", which seeks to integrate Afro-Cuban cultural elements and expression into Cuban identity. The publication of *Motivos de Son* resulted in nationwide and global scandal that lasted years according to Guillén (Morejón 39). They were written in the rhythm of The Cuban Son and the pronunciation and accentuation of the black population according to Guillén. They examined the coexistence of the 'blacks' and 'whites' in Cuba, a discussion that had been delayed for centuries as a result of the prejudices associated with the dominant social class and race. (Morejón 41). Guillén, of mixed African and European descent, described the everyday life of the black lower-class sectors in Cuba, particularly the pervasive nature of poverty and racism. He also sought to establish African roots as being part of the national culture of the island. He saw the role of the 'blacks' as being culturally and ethnically relevant in the negotiation and construction of Cuban national and cultural identity.

Unlike other *negrista* poets, Guillén's poetry in *Motivos de Son* emphasised the orality of the black lower-class sectors in Cuba and can be identified as an endeavour to incorporate the lyrical, rhythmical and stylistic qualities of *son* music. Guillén's structure of the *poema son* reflects that of the classic *son*. It consisted of the introductory *largo*, which presented the main narrative

or conflict, next came the *montuno*, in which the conflict was solved, or the main idea developed (Smart 356). This section is rhythmically faster and in the form of a call-and-response pattern. This structure is particularly evident in the third *poema son* of the collection, “Si tú supiera”:

¡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,

songo bé;

sóngoro cosongo

de mamey;

sóngoro, la negra

baila bien;

sóngoro de uno,

sóngoro de tre.

¡Aé

bengan a bé;

aé,

bamo pa be;

bengan, sónico cosongo,

sónico cosongo de mamey! (qtd. in Guillén and Augier 104)

The first and last stanza make up the *largo*, where the main idea and conflict is presented, the second stanza is the *montuno*, the rhythm is faster and is the main chorus with the final stanza acting as a response. Not only does Guillén reproduce the structural qualities of the *son*, but also employs the use of *jitanjáfora*, “an extra-semantic phenomenon” (Sáinz-Blanco), that consists of presumably nonsensical inventions, words without meanings, reflective of rhythmic and musical sounds. It is a typically Africanized element that elevated the so-called “blackness” of Guillén’s poetry.

Guillén’s son poems also creatively transformed musical influences of popular Cuban trova groups such as el Trío Matamoros and el Sexteto Habanero, reproducing the popular musical sounds and rhythms of Afro-Hispanic origin, thus reintegrating African folkloric elements and traditions into Cuban identity, without exoticizing or romanticising them.

Some critics saw the collection as “aggressive, abrasive and unsettling” (White 31) and almost vulgar in its linguistic and thematic expression. The use of the son, the popular mulatto musical form, was viewed as a disturbing and overbearing form of expression, a nostalgic lamentation of a lost cultural identity. However, the language can be perceived as being authentic and untainted, representative of daily Cuban life, Spanish language that comprised the “built-in rhythmic pattern” (White 31) that represented African musical forms, but interpreted as “ignorant”, “incorrect”, “barbaric” and “a sordid reminder of their so-called inherent inferiority” (White 31). However, the deformation and deconstruction of the Spanish language as used by Guillén sought to dispel and refute misconceptions, stereotypes and negative perceptions surrounding the Afro-

descendent population and its use of language in Cuba. The conscious use of dialect is a form of admiration, a combination of linguistic and musical elements, reflective of Guillén's progressive reintegration of "Africanness", "black" aesthetic and reimagination of Cuban identity. It can be said that Guillén identifies it as its own language reflective of Cuba's mestizo or culturally mixed and complex cultural civilisation. By employing these linguistic elements, Guillén is able to recount Cuba's painful historical past without romanticizing it or beautifying it in such a way that he is capable of maintaining its authenticity.

Guillén acknowledges the distorted or even corrupted use of the Spanish language as a form of acceptance of Cuba's colonial history. He acknowledges the culturally Hispanic elements impacting the Afro-descendent population. By understanding Cuba's history, he is capable of identifying and understanding the progressive development of Cuban cultural identity through his use of language. It can also be said that the orality of the Afro-Cuban population used in Guillén's poetry allows for the construction of a new cultural and literary language that evokes and preserves the linguistic elements of Afro-Hispanic speech.

The poet's musically folkloric poetry is often accompanied by a tone of sarcasm and irony, almost as a jeer or protestation of the oppressed and marginalised black community. Clement A. White states that, "he wants to depict Blacks accurately, not make them a part of the mythic system deeply rooted in prejudice and hate" (36). The use of dialect is purposely provocative, allowing Guillén to negotiate and reinforce Afro-Hispanic cultural identity. Furthermore, this use of sarcasm and irony becomes a form of social commentary, reflecting his preoccupation with social issues.

"Negro bembón" ("Thick-lipped Cullud Boy), deals specifically with the social issues in a colour conscious society, arising through existing racial prejudices. He uses sarcasm and humour to highlight the natural physical beauty of the Afro-descendent man, characteristics conventionally

subjected to ridicule, criticism and racial discrimination. In this poem, the speaker is reproaching her lover for taking offense at being referred to as “thick-lipped coloured boy”. She claims that he has everything he needs as she provides for him willingly. Readers are also able to identify Guillén’s manipulation of orthography, reflective of the popular speech of the black Cuban population, culturally and linguistically influenced by the mestizo nature of the nation to which it belongs.

¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,
cuando te disen negro bembón,
si tiene la boca santa,
negro bembón? (qtd. in Guillén and Márquez 40)

How come you jumps salty
when they calls you thick-lipped boy,
if yo’ mouf’s so sweet,
thick-lipped cullud boy? (Translation by Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers,
Guillén and Márquez 41)

Guillén uses orthographic elements to reflect the pronunciation and accentuation of Cuban Spanish dialect. For example, in the first line of the stanza he writes “Po” instead of “Por”, “brabo”, instead of “bravo”. He uses language, popular expression and musicality as instruments capable of reflecting an exact representation of reality. Magdalena Jiménez Romero asserts that:

Guillén reivindica en *Motivos de son*, por un lado, la lengua de su pueblo como elemento cultural que lo hace indisoluble, incorporándola como creación estilística en la poesía de su tiempo; y, por otro lado, el español cubano en su variante negra, de sociedad relegada por el elitismo y el racismo de la clase alta dominada por blancos. (2007)

The poet is able to reimagine concepts of blackness and Afro-Hispanic identity by destabilizing the conventional meaning associated with intentionally deprecating, racially discriminatory language and vocabulary, such as “bembon”, a creole term meaning “thick lips”, using it to highlight the social conditions that plague black lower class Cubans, in this instance racism.

This linguistic inadequacy and deficiency associated with the Afro-descendent Cubans’ control of the Spanish language is utilized in a literary and revolutionary method, condemning and countering misconceptions of Afro-descendent people. Afro-Cubans do not speak ‘standard’ Spanish because they did not receive any formal education or instruction, nor is it evidence of an incapacity to grasp a language, however, it reflects the social order of Afro-Cubans who were relegated and confined within the bounds of the lowest education level by the bourgeois class. Thus, the poet subliminally contends with the marginalization, oppression and injustices which Afro-Cubans faced. According to White (35), “Guillén portrays Blacks as victims of an unjust society”. This use of dialect to underpin socio-cultural and socio-economic situations of Afro-Cubans is also present in Guillén’s “Búcate plata” (“Go Get Some Bread”):

Búcate plata,
búcate plata,
poqqe no doy un paso má:
etoy a arró con galleta,
na má.
Yo bien sé cómo etá to,
pero biejo, hay que comé:
búcate plata,
búcate plata,

poqqe me boy a corré (qtd. in Guillén and Márquez 44)

Go get some bread,

go get some bread,

‘cause I can’t go one step ahead,

I’m down to soda crackers,

‘nough said.

Sure I know what’s goin’ down,

but man you gotta eat:

go get some bread,

go get some bread,

or I’m hittin’ the street. (Translation by Jill Netchinsky, Guillén and Márquez 45)

The poet explores the impoverished economic conditions of a woman pleading to her lover to release her of her economic state of deprivation and destitution that are “inclining her to accept a descent to lower social standing” (Ellis 70). By highlighting the socio-economic issues and the social aesthetic of the black lower class community, through the intentional use of dialect, the poet underscores the importance of the existence of the black community in Cuba and the seriousness of their situation while protesting against the treatment of Afro-Cubans. Davies suggests the following, “Guillén confronts official language construction in order to render a revolutionary verbal linguistic pattern that inscribes a marker of cultural and ethnic identity, while addressing the complexities of poverty and marginalization among black Cubans” (63).

Another element of Afro-Cuban oral and linguistic practices, integral in Guillén’s *negrista* poetry, is the employment of humour and satire. Guillén employs a particularly Cuban brand of humour, known as *choteo*, a distinctive and popular cultural form. A predominantly verbal form

of expression, it employs elements of performativity which are strongly influenced by Afro-Cuban culture, aiming to criticize, ridicule and destabilize contemporary topical issues *Choteo* is often used as an instrument for subverting power, authority and hierarchy. According to Emily Maguire, “it goes beyond simple humour, serving either as a way to express solidarity and respect, or as a method of - destabilizing power relations”. In *Motivos de Son*, Guillén uses the *choteo* elements to interrogate and highlight the oppressive social structures in Cuba and to portray the social and cultural dynamic of Cuba, specifically of the lower-class black community, examining issues of race and poverty. In “Negro bombón”, he skilfully employs *choteo*-like elements to explore racial stereotypes that plague Cuban society. This use of humour is most evident in the first stanza, “How come you jumps salty / when they calls you thick-lipped boy / if yo’ mouf’s so sweet / thick-lipped cullud boy?” (Guillén and Marquez 41). The speaker asks “if yo’ mouf’s so sweet”, why does the “negro bombón” get angry when he is referred to as “negro bombón”, yet ironically, still addresses him as “negro bombón”. The speaker questions the man’s rejection of his own racial and physical identity. The humour derives from the speaker making fun of his quickness to anger. This humour is used to challenge dominant racial ideologies in Cuban society by drawing excessive attention to the man’s physical features, he addresses the existing absurdity in relation to the racial stereotypes and discrimination, in other words, the poet views the black man’s self-hate as absurd, a post-colonial thinking that has been passed on through generations. The speaker states “She’s givin’ you all you need // Still you go around beefin’ / thick-lipped cullud boy”, here the speaker is almost mocking the “negro bombón”, stating he has everything, yet fails to accept his own identity as an Afro-descendent man, which Smart refers to as “the black man’s condition” (359). Guillén’s use of *choteo* is also a reflection of the expressive and animated nature of speech in Cuban communities, particularly that of “street talk” or “picong”, derived from the Spanish word *picón*

and maintains similar elements of ridiculing, humour and satire as *choteo*. The musicality and the repetition of “negro bembón” further emphasises the *choteo*-like qualities of the poem, Guillén paints an intimate portrait of the poem’s main character, simultaneously deriding him and celebrating his cultural and ethnic identity (Maguire). By questioning the existence of racial stereotypes and prejudices, Guillén is then able to destabilize them to allow for racial and cultural integration of African cultural elements in Cuban national and cultural identity.

Guillén further emphasises the concept of black self-acceptance in “Mulata”. In this poem Guillén effectively highlights the modern, yet taboo concept of colourism. According to Summer Sewell and Jessica Reed, colourism is discrimination against individuals of a darker skin tone, thus, persons of a lighter skin tone are typically associated with privilege, wealth and power (2019). The speaker, an angered suitor, expresses his disdain towards a mulatto woman he had been wooing who negatively criticised his typically “black” facial features:

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 é bien grande,

Y tu pasa, colorá.

Tanto tren con tu cueppo,

Tanto tren;

Tanto tren con tu boca,

Tanto tren;

Tanto tren con tu sojo,

Tanto tren.

Si tú supiera, mulata,

La veddá:

¡Que yo con mi negra tengo,

¡Y no te quiero pa ná! (qtd. in Guillén and Márquez 42)

Yep, now I get you, high brown!

High brown, I knows likes to say

how wide my nose is anyway

like a tie-knot flattened down.

Wcll, look at yo' self an' see

you ain't no prize to wed.

Yo' mouf' is awful big fo' me,

an yo' naps is short an' red.

So much switchin' wid yo'' hips,

jes' so hot!

So much twitchin' wid yo' lips,

jes' so hot!

So much witichin' wid yo' eyes,

jes' so hot!

If you jes' knew de truf,

Miss High Brown,

I loves my coal black gal

And don't need you hangin' 'round. (Translation by Langston Hughes and Ben Federic Carruthers, Guillén and Márquez 43)

The woman of mixed race is seen as an object of desire, stereotypically associated with a superior sense of sensuality and beauty in comparison to an Afro-descendent woman. The speaker of the poem however, highlights the superficiality and the pretentiousness of “la Mulata”, stating that she also has aesthetically “black” features like himself “Yo' mouf is awful big fo' me / an yo' naps is short an' red”, he goes on to say “I loves my coal black gal”. Guillén draws the reader’s attention to the myth of colour. The woman in the poem alienated herself from her African ethnic and cultural background, her hair is dyed red, her condemnation of his physical features reflects her preference towards “whiteness”. Guillén not only interrogates the inequities of Cuban society, but also questions the Caribbean’s preoccupation with questions of colour or the shade of one’s skin, he almost sees it as absurd and as a non-issue. To Guillén, the distinction between mulatto and black is non-existent, as both are plagued by socio-economic issues. Guillén’s rejection of the mulatto woman brings forward a new admiration of the black woman (Pontrelli 72), in other words, he advocates for black self-love. Despite the abrasive or “ugly” nature of Guillén’s description of the black man’s physical features, Guillén attempts to reimagine African consciousness while debunking negative stereotypes that have overtime come to codify beliefs and reinforce standards of beauty and attractiveness.

CHAPTER THREE

Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo in Songoro Cosongo

Songoro Cosongo

After publishing his first collection of poetry, *Motivos de Son* in 1930, Nicolás Guillén continued writing in “Ideales de una raza” in the *Diario de la Marina*. According to Constance Sparrow De Garcia Barrio, Guillén’s writing “attacked the maladministration which placed Cubans, especially the lower classes, in such dire economic straits” (74). The preoccupations and sentiments of race and the socio-economic conditions in Cuba expressed in “Ideales de una raza” had also been reproduced in Guillén’s poetry. *Songoro Cosongo* was later published in October of 1931, comprising fifteen poems. It was preceded by a prologue in which the poet himself classifies the poems as “versos mulatos”, reflective of a unified Cuban national identity based on the integration of African and European cultural and ethnic components:

Diré finalmente que estos son unos versos mulatos. Participan acaso de los mismos elementos que entran en la composición étnica de Cuba, donde todos somos un poco níspero. - La inyección africana en esta tierra es tan profunda, y se cruzan y entrecruzan en nuestra bien regada hidrografía social tantas corrientes capilares, que sería trabajo de miniaturista desenredar el jeroglífico. Opino por tanto que una poesía criolla entre nosotros no lo será de un modo cabal con olvido del negro. El negro -a mi juicio- aporta esencias muy firmes a nuestro coctel. (114)

In *Songoro Cosongo* Guillén enhanced and developed the thematic complexity of his poetry. Guillén departed from the so-called “abrasiveness” which he employed in *Motivos de Son*, comprising the *son* rhythm, the use of popular speech and dramatic monologue characteristic of

the first collection of poetry. Pontrelli states, “He makes use of traditional metrical forms of rhetorical language; he enlarges his themes, covering a much wider area than in *Motivos* and reaching matters that affect the national life of Cuba itself” (160).

Guillén’s central interest however, continues to be that of the ‘blacks’ and the Cuban people as a whole, the poems are written in such a way that allows the poet to embody a sense of inclusivity and harmony within the collection, presenting preoccupations of race, imperialism and poverty that express a certain complexity that is not evident in *Motivos de Son*.

Analysis

“Llegada” (“Arrival”), written in free verse, is an impactful poetic accomplishment that seeks to establish the presence of African ancestry within the Cuban context, by exploring the arrival of the Africans in the Americas and the Caribbean and celebrating the African presence in Cuba as a positive and indispensable component of “Cubanness”.

By abandoning the so-called “abrasiveness” and “aggressiveness” that is representative of the linguistic and thematic content in *Motivos de Son*, the poet presents a heightened sense of beauty and dignity in relation to the Afro-descendent community, recognising them as an integral component of Cuban national identity and of the Caribbean as a whole. In the first stanza, “¡Aquí estamos!” carries profound significance other than its surface meaning. It is a declaration of their presence without the complexities, prejudices and discrimination associated with slavery and colonialism. Guillén does not mention the reasons or the means of this “llegada”, his objective is not to condemn the injustices which they suffered but reaffirm “blackness” as an integral factor of Cuba’s ethnic and cultural identity, a dignified image of the Afro-descendent community. Keith Ellis asserts that “The poem does indeed convey the image of blacks initiating an existence in

Cuba. Their presentation is ahistorical - they appear to be purged of the experience of slavery” (73). Guillén’s view of slavery can be seen as ironic, though the language is simple, appearing to undermine the effects of slavery, it resonates with a tone of viciousness and vengeance, alluding to the effects of the human misery and degradation consequence of slavery.

Moreover, Guillén uses figurative language to paint an image of “Africanness” without slavery, the arrival of the Africans seems vengeful and invasionary, they appear to be conquerors rather than the conquered:

¡Eh, compañeros, aquí estamos!

La ciudad nos espera con sus palacios, tenues
como panales de abejas silvestres;
sus calles están secas como los ríos cuando no llueve
en la montaña,
y sus casas nos miran con los ojos pávidos
de las ventanas.

Los hombres antiguos nos darán leche y miel
y nos coronarán de hojas verdes.

¡Eh, compañeros, aquí estamos!

Bajo el sol
nuestra piel sudorosa reflejará los rostros húmedos
de los vencidos,
y en la noche, mientras los astros ardan en la punta
de nuestras llamas,

nuestra risa madrugará sobre los ríos y los pájaros.

Hey comrades, here we are!

The city awaits with its palaces, delicate

as wild bees' honeycombs;

its streets are dry like rivers when there's no rain

in the mountains,

and its houses stare at us with the fearful eyes of windows.

The ancient men will give us milk and honey

and crown us with green leaves.

Hey comrades, here we are!

Beneath the sun

our sweaty skin will mirror the moist faces of the vanquished,

and at the night, while stars burn on the tips of our flames,

our laughter will wake on rivers and birds. (Translation by Roberto Márquez, Guillén and Márquez 53-55)

Guillén establishes an intimate relation between the Africans and nature, in which the poet portrays them as men of "quiet strength" (Ellis 73). Nature becomes the source and essence of their constantly renewed strength, "La palabra nos viene húmeda de los bosques / y un sol enérgico nos amanece entre las venas / El puño es fuerte / y tiene el reino". The poet presages the outcome of the Africans' arrival and the future that awaits them, one of suffering as suggested by the following lines "y sus casas nos miran con los ojos pávidos / de las ventanas". The dry and arid streets are foreshadowing their suffering, yet their musical traditions allow them to maintain their

strength, “Nuestro canto / es como un músculo bajo la piel del alma / nuestro sencillo canto”. Pontrelli claims that “In the tremendous physical vitality which Guillén attributes to the Negro, such elements as song, spirit and yearning have corporeal, physiological properties” (162). Guillén’s images present aggressive representations of strength, victory, self-determination, endurance and perseverance fostering black self-pride. Rather than reflect and image of victims of colonisation, Guillén focuses on the capacity of the Africans to overcome slavery through the preservation and conservation of their cultural identity.

In “Llegada” Guillén introduces a new characterisation of the “black” figure. He creates a sense of invincibility that departs from the reality of Afro-descendent Cubans, creating idealized and romanticized images of “blackness”. They are men with “el espíritu limpio” (“clean spirit”), who seek conquest and vengeance. Contrarily, one may interpret that in suppressing the injustices they faced during slavery, Guillén also alienates the “black” figure in his poetry, creating a mockery of slavery, thus preventing a truly cultural evolution that allows for the unified Cuba that the poet inherently seeks to derive from his poetry. Despite this possibility, the poet asserts his pride and respect for the black community, Clement A. White accurately points out that “The fusion of history and myth has a decisive effect: not only does the poet recall as well as identify with his ancestor, but he also condemns and rejects the evil institutions which brought them - to a hell of pain and suffering” (95).

Unable to avoid his preoccupations with questions of racial and economic imbalances and exploitation, the third poem of the collection, “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano” (1931) (“Small Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer”) illustrates the exploitation of the black Cuban boxer, first published as “Pequena Oda a Kid Chocolate” (Pontrelli 171), an ode to the popular Cuban boxing champion of the 1930s. According to Martha K. Cobb, Guillén refers to this poem as “my first

black poem” (1974), in which an Afro-descendent Cuban boxer confronts his opponents within the boxing ring and the economic and racial exploitations beyond the boxing ring. It allowed Guillén to question the relationship between Cuba and North America. By replacing the title of the poem, Guillén collectively characterised the ‘negro boxer’, highlighting racial prejudice, black self-pride, and Afro-Cuban identity. Kid Chocolate became an instrument, a figure representative of a symbolic sport through which the poet was presented with the capacity to explore social and economic tensions and through which he could celebrate black figures. He critiques social structures within society, using the boxer to represent what is often referred to as the “black struggle”:

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 (qtd. in Guillén and Márquez 56)

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 monkey,

without resorting to the ropes

or the cushions of a clinch . . .

the very Broadway

that oils its melon-mouth with fear

before your fists of dynamite
and stylish patent leather shoes . . .
is the same Broadway
that stretches out its snout, its moist enormous tongue,
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. (Translation by D. A. McMurray, Guillén and Márquez 57)

Expertly written, the poem's structure reflects that of the boxer's movement inside the ring. In the first stanza, the poet is warning the boxer about North American capitalism and the economic exploitation of "Broadway", a metaphor for the North American elements which have contributed to foreign intervention in Cuba's sugar industry, "is that same Broadway/that stretches out its

snout, its huge wet tongue, / to lick with greed / all our canefield”. However, it is to be noted that this same “Broadway” is responsible for his success. Monika Kaup asserts:

Guillén portrays a black Cuban boxer in New York in a Martian setting of a Cuban in U.S. exile, held hostage in “the belly of the monster.” The Cuban boxer’s commercial success in New York is seen as deriving in part from the Anglo-American vogue for blackness and Harlem, yet the poem asserts the value of the black boxer’s success despite and above its clearly understood conditions - white exoticism.

Consequently, a culturally symbolic sport of Afro-Cuban national and cultural identity has been almost ‘white-washed’, as such the poet warns the boxer against falling into the clutches of foreign exploitation, he tells the struggling black man to be vigilant of the oppressive forces in the North, “El Norte es fiero y rudo”. Guillén paints a hideous, almost sub-human image of “Broadway”, a blood-sucking creature, to emphasise the treatment of his people, “is the same Broadway / that stretches out its snout, its moist enormous tongue, / to lick and glut upon / our canefields' vital blood”. The poet further condemns the superficiality of the Harlem Renaissance, a typically black movement, in the final stanza of the poem further emphasising the concept of black pride, “So now that Europe strips itself/ to brown its hide beneath the sun, / and seeks in Harlem and Havana / for jazz and *son* / the Negro reigns while boulevards applaud / Let the envy of the whites / know proud, authentic black!”. Guillén presents an image of strength and vitality. Despite the boxer’s linguistic incapacities, his talent and perseverance are not limited to the ring, he has “got it made” and is aware that he is skilled and successful.

Contrastingly, it falls short of being an ode that wholly celebrates the triumph of the boxer. Instead, Guillén turns the ode into a critique and a protest against social and economic exploitation of the black community rather than the intended tribute to a national athlete.

Continuing on the theme of social protest, Guillén's "Caña", one of the poet's most famous poems due to its simplicity yet complex thematic content, is a public condemnation of European and North American economic imperialism and exploitation. According to Clement A. White, "This short poignant poem forcefully underscores the poet's objection to the unjust social hierarchy in the Caribbean. Sugarcane has for a long time been symbolic of imperialism and exploitation" (52). In the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century, sugarcane production increased in magnitude and importance in the Americas and the Caribbean. The enslaved Africans were subjected to intolerable deprivation and contemptible mistreatment and conditions. Cuba was no less susceptible to the sugarcane industry, becoming increasingly mechanized while labourers were subjected to the deplorable social conditions and exploitation. With the passing of time, the demands of the sugarcane industry, social, political and economic differences laid the basis for Cuba's struggle for independence. However, growing political tension in the late nineteenth century resulted in occupation by the United States which sought to effectively eliminate any traces of Afro-Cuban participation within Cuba's political system. Guillén's "Caña" contains the recurring symbol of the cane field as parasitic and destructive:

El negro

junto al cañaveral.

El yanqui

sobre el cañaveral.

La tierra

bajo el cañaveral.

¡Sangre

que se nos va! (qtd. in Guillén and Márquez 62)

The Black

next to the cane.

The Yankee

over the canefield.

The earth

under the canefield.

The blood

we are losing! (Translation by Roberto Marquez, Guillén and Márquez 63)

The poem sequentially explores Cuban historical events. “La tierra” has within it the stories of Cuba’s African ancestors. The verse of Guillén’s “Caña” are condemnatory, angered attacks, a cry against imperialism and exploitation. The repetition of “cañaveral” emphasises the tragic sugar cane industry and situates the Afro-Cuban figure around it. Unlike “Llegada”, the poet does not underscore the oppressive forces within the Hispanic Caribbean, yet in this poem he inherently rejects it, reflecting his opposition to the unfair treatment of the black community.

The last verse of the poem adopts an exclamatory tone, it is a sudden break in pace that produces an effect reminiscent of desperation. Here, the poet attempts to draw awareness to the situation. Rather than create an image of the immediacy of danger, the poet presents a restrained yet powerful image of the impact and effects of exploitation and imperialism. The poet has been able to accurately express and represent social and economic preoccupations that have embodied the majority of his successful works and is one of his finest achievements in *Songoro Cosongo* (1931). According to Pontrelli:

Guillen has compressed the tragedy of the cane field worker, the Negro, bound to the cane field - The physical stamina of the Negro, his ability to endure the excruciating work of the fields, of the mill, of loading, has established a union of four centuries between the Negro and the “cañaveral” a union which today still exacts from him the tribute of suffering and poverty. (179-180)

CHAPTER FOUR

Afro-Hispanic female identity in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén

Afro-Hispanic female identity in Spanish Caribbean poetry

The Black female in Spanish Caribbean poetry is often assigned characteristics that distort, replace or obscure reality, consequently reaffirming existing racial stereotypes of Afro-Hispanic female identity that date back to the colonial era. Afro-descendent women are often assigned damaging stereotypical images, portrayed as sensual creatures. Claudette RoseGreen-Williams points out that, “Many poets are irresistibly driven to write about the sexual attributes and behaviour of the Afro Caribbean woman, and, in fact, sexuality is the main context in which they have defined her identity” (1993).

This stereotypical notion of the Afro-Hispanic female identity has been propagated by male ‘white’ *negrista* poets like Luis Pales Matos and has often been translated into the work of Black, Spanish Caribbean poets. The Afro-Hispanic woman’s physical features and anatomy have long been an obsession of *negrista* poets. Conversely, she is frequently identified as unfaithful, promiscuous and dependent on her male counterpart. The conceptualization of Afro-Hispanic female identity was also centred around conventional and traditionalist characterizations. However, the representation of the Black woman in *negrista* poetry does not necessarily reflect the racial dehumanization of their cultural and female identity, but the performativity of African culture, that is, the importance of music and dance. Very few poets in the Hispanic Caribbean were equipped with the right tools to appropriately and efficiently represent the reality of femininity and black female identity in their poetry. Poets like Nicolás Guillén have reimagined the image of the Black woman outside of the superficial, cosmetic aesthetic that was previously perpetuated by

negrista poets, contextualizing Afro-Hispanic female identity around the struggle for survival and the conservation of her cultural heritage.

Analysis

Like many of his colleagues, Guillén too appears to have subscribed to the European model when constructing the image Afro-Hispanic of the woman, particularly in his earlier works. However, it is important to note that the Afro-Hispanic woman in Guillén's poetry is not necessarily subjected to dehumanization or is portrayed as "morally degenerate" (White 81). She is portrayed within a socio-economic context that seeks to emphasise the role of the Afro-Hispanic woman in a predominantly patriarchal society, governed by pre-existing stereotypes reinforced by the upper-class about the Afro-descendent community.

In *Motivos de Son* (1930), Guillén presents an image of traditional feminine qualities in his portrayal of the Afro-Hispanic woman, typically emphasising traditional roles of the woman, female aesthetic, female sexuality and sensuality. In the poem "Mulata", in his quest for black consciousness, the poet shows a psychological need to essentially dehumanize the "mulata". Often associated with some form of aesthetic superiority due to her mixed-race status. The "mulata" is given preference due to her racialized identity, however, the poet attempts to dismantle this myth. However, he conforms to typically "machista" codes in which he uses language that manages to create highly erotic images of the "mulata" woman when expressing his preferred attraction of the "coal black gal" (Guillén and Márquez 43).

So much switchin' wid yo'' hips,

jes' so hot!

So much twitchin' wid yo' lips,

jes' so hot!

So much witichin' wid yo' eyes,

jes' so hot!

Thus, resulting in the sexual dehumanization and objectification of the “mulata”. He presents an image of the black woman as being a desirable mate for the black man, yet this does not justify his highly sexual and stereotypical portrayal of the mestizo woman. In this way, Guillén lowers the status of the “mulata” in order to draw awareness to the black woman, his contempt for the “mulata” has a more personal tone rather than it being a social protest.

This sexualised portrayal and interpretation of Afro-Hispanic female identity is reiterated in “Búcate Plata” and “Si Tú Supiera”. It can be inferred from these poems that the Afro-Hispanic woman in Guillén’s *Motivos de Son* is viewed as unfaithful and promiscuous, “búcate plata, / poque me boy a corré” (“Búcate Plata”) and “que cuando no tube plata / te corrite de bachata, / sin acoddadte de mí” (“Si Tú Supiera”). He highlights the common misconception that the Afro-Hispanic woman resorts to sexual favours in unbearable or destitute situations to improve her economic status.

Also, specific Afro-Hispanic dance forms like *bachata* or *rumba* are often perceived as erotic due to its distinctive choreographic features. Readers may infer, nonetheless, that the poet’s intention is to address the independence, strength and vitality of the Afro-Hispanic woman in times of difficulty. Guillén not only highlights the plight of the Afro-Hispanic community, but of the black woman as well, who is subjected to double the oppression in society, he brings to the foreground the struggle for survival through the eyes of the black woman.

In “Mi Chiquita” (My Little Woman), in conveying his appreciation for the black woman, the poet highlights conventionally domestic roles, such as ironing, sewing and cooking, conforming to traditional features and components of Afro-Hispanic female identity:

Ella laba, plancha, cose,

y sobre to, caballero,

¡como cosina!

Si la bienen a bucá

pa bailá,

pa comé,

ella me tiene que llebá,

o traé. (qtd. Guillén and Márquez 46)

Nicolás Guillén’s portrayal of Afro-Hispanic female identity goes beyond language that connotes imagery of a sexual nature, as well as the stereotypical portrayal of the Afro-Hispanic female. In *Songoro Cosongo* (1931), Guillén sought to celebrate the black woman, as stated by Claudette May Williams, the poet “uses his poetry to canonize the black woman. He too shows his awareness of the vital role that literature can play in the crystallization and dissemination of images and stereotypes” (Williams 73). Guillén’s “Mujer Nueva” introduces readers to exactly that, a new woman. Written in free verse, the image of the Negress, primitive, elemental and intrinsic, is extended throughout the poem, giving a revolutionized representation and portrayal of Afro-Hispanic female identity. Rather than sensualize the Afro-Hispanic woman, the poet creates a goddess-like image, Africanized, exotic and almost idealized representation of the black woman:

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. (qtd. in Guillén and Márquez 60)

With the equatorial circle
tied around her waist like a little world,
The Negress, the new woman,
comes forward in her airy serpent morning gown.

Crowned with palms
like a newly arrived goddess,
she brings unspoken words,
her solid loins,
her voice, her teeth, the morning and her leap. (Translation by Roberto Márquez, Guillén
and Márquez 61)

The poet also establishes a relation between woman and nature, as such he is able to adequately express the strength, sensuality and beauty of the “new woman”, “Con el círculo ecuatorial / ceñido a la cintura como a un pequeño mundo, // Coronada de palmas / como una diosa recién llegada”. For the poet, this representation of the black woman is refreshing, he sanctifies her presence, she

is without the stereotypical connotations that sought to taint and obscure reality, this “new woman” is intellectually, psychologically and physically superior and seeks to re-establish concepts of Afro-Hispanic female identity. Guillén reaffirms the relation between the female and nature in the “Madrigal” of the same collection. Consisting of two poems of the same name, in the first “Madrigal” he compares her hands to tropical grapes, “De tus manos gotean / las uñas, en un manojo de diez uvas moradas”. In the second, he paints an image of a black woman in the nude.

Tu vientre sabe más que tu cabeza
y tanto como tus muslos.
Ésa
es la fuerte gracia negra
de tu cuerpo desnudo.

Here Guillén contends with the concept of nakedness, he projects an image of a balanced, confident, strong, graceful body rather than present readers with a defenceless image of the black female, in this way he places his poetry outside of stereotypical portrayals of Afro-Hispanic female identity by omitting the erotic component of black female identity perpetuated in the works of other *negrista* poets. As attested by Roland E. Bush:

Here the Black woman is presented as a work of nature: a creature devoid of learning but beautiful in the brilliant black gracefulness of her strong naked body. In her sensuality she embodies the essence of Africa and, for the poet, symbolizes the bountifulness of the continent from which she originates. (9)

He goes on to compare her eyes to the Zambezi River, meaning the “Great River” in Tonga dialect, and the fourth longest river in Africa. As stated by Bush, the poet creates an inseparable link between the black female and the continent from which her ancestors originated. Like many of his

previous poems, he presents his recurring preoccupation with black consciousness and acceptance by elaborating on the woman's beauty in relation to Africa:

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.

Guillén idolizes and celebrates the black woman in "Madrigal". He describes the sensuality of the black woman without predominantly sexual imagery like his poems in *Motivos de Son*.

Guillén's depiction of Afro-Hispanic female identity is oftentimes interconnected and interrelated with music and performance. Taking into account that Afro-descendent musical genres were particularly undervalued during that time, Afro-Cuban *negrista* writers aspired to preserve their cultural identity through their literary works by way of music and dance often expressed by means of the aesthetic features of the Afro-Hispanic woman. Nevertheless, reference to the choreographic elements of Afro-Hispanic music and dance are often associated with common misinterpretations such as the hyper-sexualization of the female body and the Afro-Hispanic woman being perceived as a sexual object valued within the realms of her sexual prowess or capabilities. Guillén, however, goes beyond highlighting the erotic and sexual parts of the black woman's body. In his poem "Rumba" (*Songoro Cosongo*, 1931), the poet presents the grace and essence of the Cuban rumba. The rumba is a pantomimic African dance which simulates the act of copulation, originally part of a ritualistic ceremony that promotes fertility, life and growth (Pontrelli 194). The Cuban rumba, however, is reflective of a dialogue between man and woman. On the other hand, the poem does not describe the specific choreographic elements of the rumba,

rather, the poet focuses on the emotions and sensations that arise from its performance. It must however be noted that the poet frequently places his focus on the woman's lower body "Pimienta de la cadera // Locura del bajo vientre // te dolerá la cadera // cadera dura y sudada" (Obra poética 123-124). Thus, the poet subtly and moderately alludes to the woman's sensuality. He does not exaggerate or eroticize the black female body, his aim is not to sexually dehumanize or objectify the Afro-Hispanic woman but to express the essence of this Afro-descendent musical genre through the passion and emotions as well as sensuality of the Afro-Hispanic female. In this way preserving the transculturated elements of Cuba, that is the African and European cultural elements that make up the Cuban national identity. "Rumba" also encompasses an exaggerated use of imagery that evokes a sense of freedom within the Afro-Hispanic woman. Pontrelli further points out that:

Guillen's "Rumba" is a triumph of sensory imagery; invoking the pungent spices, the heady rum, the warm Caribbean Sea, the poet makes vivid and memorable associations. The rhythm of the lines serves to transmit not only the rumba beat but also the mounting passion of the performers as the dance approaches and fulfils its consummation. (199)

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined and analysed Afro-Hispanic cultural identity through the works of Cuban author Nicolás Guillén, identifying the emergence of Afro-Hispanic poetry as an essential component in the study Caribbean and Spanish Caribbean literature. Chapter one delves into previously existing literature, examining concepts and ideologies surrounding Spanish Caribbean identity. It also put into context the life and work of Nicolás Guillén.

Chapter two entitled *Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo in Motivos de Son*, Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo were analysed within the collection. It presents the aggressive tone employed by Guillén to address the harsh and unfair reality of the Black community in Cuba in the author's unique attempt to provide Black cultural awareness. The poetry of this collection also encompasses immense similarity to the Cuban Son.

In the third chapter, *Afro-Hispanic identity and Negrismo in Songoro Cosongo*, the subtle change in thematic and stylistic elements are examined. In this collection his poetry, referred to as “versos mulatos”, is seen as being more thematically complex and less “abrasive”. Guillén presents a variety of socio-economic preoccupations and frequently examines the cultural elements of Cuban identity, while still emphasising aspects of the Black community.

Lastly, chapter four, *Afro-Hispanic female identity in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén*, examines the portrayal of the Afro-Hispanic female in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, particularly identifying poems from *Motivos de Son* (1930) and *Songoro Cosongo* (1931). Guillén's portrayal of the Afro-Hispanic female contextualises her as a principal element in the preservation of African culture and as a critique on Cuban society and the treatment of the Black community.

While there is still much work to be done in reference to Afro-Hispanic poetry and Afro-Hispanic literature as a whole in the Caribbean region, this research paper aimed to contextualize

Afro-Hispanic poetry, the Negrismo cultural and literary movement and the study and importance of Spanish Caribbean literature at the tertiary level, particularly in the Caribbean. In assessing the poetry of Cuban author and poet, Nicolás Guillén and an extensive number of secondary sources, it can be concluded that the culture and socio-economic problems of the Afro-descendent community in the Spanish Caribbean have profoundly impacted and influenced the development and evolution of not only Afro-Hispanic cultural identity but identity as a whole in the Caribbean. Thus, only in further examining and analysing *negrista* literature, particularly that which questions concepts of feminism and female identity, one is able to understand questions of identity that plague Caribbean society.

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