

## **Inventions for many voices: poetry, music and politics in Nicolás Guillén**

### **Invenções a muitas vozes: poesia, música e política em Nicolás Guillén**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The text aims to raise questions about Nicolas Guillen's work from a social History perspective, mainly focusing on his early 30's production. By discussing his poetry and performances in Cuba from those years, the article tries to stimulate the reflection about the plots woven between interlocutors then and there. Guillen himself is one of those interlocutors, not only when he incorporates the popular voices that are expressed in his poetry by musical forms, but also when his work starts to assume a social-political bias in the cultural environment of that time.

**KEYWORDS:** Poetry. Popular Culture. Ethnicity. Music. Politics.

#### **RESUMO**

O texto tem por objetivo discutir questões a respeito da obra poética de Nicolás Guillén, especificamente a produzida até inícios dos anos 1930, na perspectiva da história social. A partir das questões que emergem da sua poesia e da sua atuação em Cuba nesses anos, procura refletir sobre as tramas de interlocução nas quais o autor se insere, mais especificamente no ato político de incorporar vozes populares que se expressam a partir de formas musicais, entre outras, na sua poética, e dos sentidos sociais que sua obra passa a desempenhar no panorama cultural e político da época.

**PALAVRAS CHAVES:** Poesia. Cultura popular. Etnicidade. Música. Política.

By looking at Nicolás Guillén's poetic works nowadays, we face current questions that emerge from his poetic works, inextricably connected to his political positioning. It is impossible to analyze it without linking it to the 1959 Cuban revolution, even risking monumentalizing it, as discussed by Le Goff, seeing the role played by the poet in the direction of cultural matters in pre and post-revolutionary periods.

The complexity of the poetic works of Guillén themselves, since his first texts in his youth (*Cerebro y corazón*, 1922) and *Otros poemas* (1920-1923), followed by the so called *Poemas de transición* (1927-1931), up to the *Motivos de Son* (1930) and *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931), as seen in the *Obras Completas* organized by his great friend and biographer, already forward us to the appreciation of afro-Cuban poetry. A lot of

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the ulterior work, facing the political and social matters that in many aspects overcome the simply ethnic aspects of this first part, was analyzed as pre-acting the occurrence of a revolutionary process in Cuba. However, more than highlighting this “prophetic” perspective, the position held in this article is that Guillén can be better analyzed if we confront it with the issues of his time, and as such we sought, in this analysis, to highlight its *experiential* and testimonial aspects, without leading it to the predictability of a future that was going to happen.

As such, there are challenges in a historiographical approach. Nicolás Guillén’s poetic works, along with the poet as an engaged intellectual, places himself in the forefront of some of the fundamental issues of his time, from those stemming from colonialism and American interventionism lived in Cuba up to the first half of the XX century, up others that mobilized leftist forces, within Latin America and Europe. It covers from the avant-garde experiences, to more pamphleteering writings, some of them “ordered” to highlight the importance of some facts and events, important for Latin America’s leftist movement itself. His literary works, despite being extremely heterogeneous, if one considers their temporal extension, on the one hand, allow for the perception of memories of the Cuban independence, inseparable from and conditioned by slavery abolition and, therefore, give one the possibility of thinking of the war of independence against Spain not only as a political wish for separation, but also as a reaction of the Afro-Cubans motivated by the desire of racial justice.

Guillén, in that sense, is the poet of the black Cuban musicality, of the rhythm known as *son*, music, words and dancing at the same time: some of his poems are still sung and danced to in today’s Cuba. His poetry allowed for breaks, from a literary point of view, that were enlarged by the musicalizing done mainly by Cuban composers, from the movement called *Afroubanismo*, fundamentally valuing the ethnical aspects in his poetry and transferring them into the popular and classical music of that period.

Nicolás Cristóbal Guillén was born in Camagüey, in Cuba’s interior, in 1902, the same year in which the country had its first “recognized” independent government. His father, a journalist and founder of the newspaper *Las Dos Repúblicas*, was elected as senator for the Liberal Party in 1908, and murdered in 1917 during the civil war known as “La Chambelona”. This last fact, together with the loss of the newspaper that his father edited to the conservatives in power, caused a turnaround in the Guillén’s family life, causing the young Nicola, still a very young student, to start working as a typographer.

After concluding his bachelor degree in Camagüey, Guillén went to Havana, to study law. He enrolled in the University of Havana in 1920, and dropped out soon after,

dedicating himself to journalism, returning then to his hometown. In 1926 he finally moved to Havana and started collaborating in some newspapers and literary magazines sections: mainly in the section *Ideales de una raza*, in the conservative *Diário de la Marina*, and after in *El Mundo*. Until 1936 he continued collaborating with magazines such as *Información*, *El loco* (humorous weekly publication), *Resumen* (edited by the Communist Party), among others.

Guillén, in his literary formation, had contacts with the classical Spanish authors (Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Góngora, Quevedo), as well as the neoclassical and romantics, and in Havana, with the Cuban avant-garde. At twenty he had already produced a book of verses called *Cerebro y Corazón*, published only sometime after, when the poet was better known in Cuba. The magazine *Orto* published in 1927, six of his poems: *El aeroplano*, *La voz desconocida*, *La nueva musa*, *Tu recuerdo*, *Futuro* and *Sol de Lluvia*<sup>2</sup>.

Practicing his journalist's activities in the conservative *Diário de la Marina*, he rapidly identified himself with the positioning of the avant-garde intellectuals gathered in the so called *Grupo Minorista*, from which, among others, were, Juan Marinello, Ruben Martinez Villena, Fernando Ortiz, Alejo Carpentier,.

Although this insertion represents an approximation of the group to the modern or post-modern aesthetics, it uncovered other possibilities that would keep some members near and others far from it: as highlighted by one of the authors who analyses that part of his work "el vanguardismo cubano, tanto en Guillén como en los demás poetas de aquellos años, tuvo, en su diversidad, acentos peculiares y fue sólo una estación de paso para seguir otro rumbo" (BARRERA, 2003, p. 96), having served to gather a group of young people who were interested in literature and politics. What was very clear was the joining together of an avant-garde discussion in the artistic area with a political positioning – against the Zayas government, against the North-American intervention propitiated by the Platt Amendment, and against the dictatorial government, from 1925 of Gerardo Machado. Added to that, a proposal for change also reached public education, the living and working conditions of factory workers and farmers, etc. Searching his own route in poetry, Guillén would add to it a specific positioning caused by his black condition in Cuba at that time.

In his autobiography, published in 1982 entitled *Páginas Vueltas*, Guillén spoke of the most significant aspects of his formation, as a journalist and as a poet. Two issues, according to him, weighed heavily in that sense: firstly his experience as a mulatto living among both white and black relatives and friends of the family, which led

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<sup>2</sup> Included in the consulted anthologies as *Poemas de transición (1927-1931)*.

him to understand the social issues involving these different Cuban groups and positioning himself as black, along with black intellectuals (even if they were mulattos, as he was). He spoke of the matter in this way: “Si me preguntara a qué classe social pertenecía mi familia en aquella época yo diría con toda seguridad que a la pequeña burguesía negra. Negra, porque ése era el color de nuestra piel en un país como el nuestro, entonces víctima de profunda división social.” (GUILLÉN, 1982, p. 48).

Secondly, one can highlight an anti-North-American positioning, that he clearly identified, even when he criticized the attitude of one of his teachers – of English, as it was – who sold grades in his course, as well as the “habit” among many to plagiarize and sell teaching texts as being their own. He expresses it thus: “Hacerse un hombre era superar todo eso, o tal vez adaptarse *a eso*, vencido por la influencia del imperio cercano, que nos abatía y cubría con sus alas, como hace el águila para devorar su presa, y que ahora veía de cerca y casi podía tocar.” (GUILLÉN, 1982, p. 27-28).

He justifies after: “Desde esta época creo yo que viene mi rebeldía contra lo norteamericano” (GUILLÉN, 1982, p. 28), posteriorly assuring “rebeldía y no odio”, since it wasn’t possible to attribute to the entire American people “el salvajismo racial, las quemadas de negros, la vida miserable de los *ghettos*, todo el dramático cuadro que ofrecen ciertas zonas (muy numerosas por desgracia) del pueblo en Estados Unidos” (GUILLÉN, 1982, p. 28). Such feelings came not only from experiences and discussions in his house with his father’s friends, but also from the position, always reaffirmed by him, that the birth of the Cuban state, as well as the existing social problems, “estuvieron condicionados por la cercanía *histórica* de la esclavitud – cuatro siglos casi de funesto colonialismo español -, y de la proximidad *geográfica* de Estados Unidos, especialmente el sur de este país”. (GUILLÉN, 1982, p. 28). In other words, from the perception that the Spanish domination was simply replaced by the Yankee domination<sup>3</sup>.

The Cuban independence process presents some differences to the rest of Latin America, and that can help to understand Guillén’s position in that matter. In the interpretation of the Cuban historian Joaquín Santana Castillo, in Cuba, the idea of nation and nationality didn’t appear from the top, as in the remaining Latin American nations, but it became necessary to create a patriotic conscience that brought forth Cuban nationality as a beginning step to the nation-state (CASTILLO, 2006, p. 21). In

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<sup>3</sup> In 1898, under the pretext of the explosion of a North American vessel, the United States declared war on Spain, and occupying Cuba until 1902. In 1901, the Cuban congress accepted to include in its constitution the Platt Amendment which gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuba whenever its interests were threatened, which happened in 1906, 1912, 1917, 1920 and 1934. The Platt Amendment kept Cuba as an American protectorate until 1933, when Fulgêncio Batista came into power.

essence, according to Castillo, that, in itself, constituted the positioning of the liberal project that would be after resumed, reformulated and enlarged by Martí. In the articulation of both speeches – the one by the liberals and the one by José Martí, - is the first war for independence, slavery abolition and a new international situation with the emergence of North American imperialism. Castillo concludes then: “El proyecto martiniano de defensa y esclarecimiento de la especificidad de la América no sajona supera este esquema al entender que se habían ignorado las peculiaridades de nuestra cultura y origen, se habían copiado, miméticamente, códigos foráneos ignorando el factor autóctono y la búsqueda de soluciones propias.” (CASTILLO, 2006, p. 23).

Hugo Achuga identifies, in the Latin-Americanist speech expressed in the phrase *Nuestra América*, by Martí, “una acción a nivel real y simbólico”, in which is constituted “la definición y la propuesta de una identidad continental y la expresión de un deseo de integración que se apoya en la creencia de poseer un destino propio, por diferenciado, y común”. As such, it expresses the idea of an imagined community, in Anderson’s – “imaginada no por ser irreal sino por ideológica”, from which is defined the place from which the enunciated subject is going to constitute his speech. The colonial origin of the expression, in this sense, “la posición del sujeto colonial que se enfrenta al sujeto central o imperial y articula un discurso, el suyo propio, que o identifique y por lo mismo lo diferencie.” (ACHUGA, 1994, p. 637-638).

In the configuration of an American identity opposed to the Anglo Saxon, seen both in the colonial exploitation and in the North American interventionism, one could resort either to a reconfiguration of the Hispanic heritage or to the afro-Caribbean culture. A distancing of these two perspectives, the pure and simple negation of them, or an approximation between them didn’t come without its ambiguities. The social perspective that divided different groups, the increase in value of an “urban” culture (and the devaluation of the migrating rural components), caused situations in which a miscegenation project (even in a cultural point of view) wasn’t enough to ensure the construction of a national identity.

Explicitly assuming a continuity from Martí, Guillén turns to the difference perspective, not the diversity one. The black man in his poetry is not one of the components of the Cuban social fabric, from which a wholeness is built; on the contrary, it is he, black man, that defines, from the temporalities of his social experience, the social logic of the cultural difference, hybrid and singular. From there, one can conclude that the issues between whites and blacks, in Guillén’s point of view, could only have a revolutionary solution, because only inside of a revolutionary project could the identity problems be solved relating to the construction of nationality and

identity themselves (Cuban/Caribbean/Latin-American) - in other words, overcoming prejudice, racism, marginalization could only be solved if there was a solution to the class situation. Therefore, Guillén, in his poetry and journalistic activity, clearly connected social class and color of the skin, and pointed to a stratification of these different groups. Even though there were whites and blacks in his family, so he defined himself as mulatto, he saw a complexity in this division. He referred, for example in his autobiography, to the existence of several societies in Camagüey, two of which were black (one accusing the other of making concessions during the independence period), another one of mulattos (which Guillén despised, maybe because of his ideal of social ascension *despite* the color of the skin), next to another two white ones, one of aristocrats, another of the petty bourgeoisie, the latter somewhat tolerant of the poorest of their own color. In Havana, there were references to the Atenas club, which congregated the “aristocratic” part of the black population, and the Fraternal Union, of the less privileged ones.

Since his first journalistic texts, ethnic questions were asked as social questions. At the same time he denounced that the issues of the black man in Cuba were much more of factual nature than of a lawful one – since the law didn’t deny any rights, but the black man was not recognized as a professional, but treated as a “negro” by whites - it looked down on those that lived marginally to the popular culture and didn’t recognize the beauty of their traditional musical manifestations, such as the *son*, the rumba, the *guaracha*, among others.

According to Rivera, Guillén was introduced to Cuban poetry through the *son*<sup>4</sup>, but, at the same time, his work was responsible for the penetration of this genre within the national cultural framework. Not without conflicts, as much from the purists’ side, who were scared of the introduction of expressions of the popular speech in a literary work, as in relation to the blacks themselves who had a desire for “whitening”, since Guillén’s poetry highlighted the signs of an identity that they preferred to hide. However, more than being *essentially* black, the *son* expressed the historicity of the black man in Cuba, in other words, it expressed the identity of a popular art that presented itself as mulatto; African in its rhythm, Spanish in its verse structure, its repetitive character has a lot to do with the call and answer singing of the blacks, in

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<sup>4</sup> The *son* is a musical genre of a much older rural origin, that starts to spread through Cuba in the 1920s, linked to a sense of transgression: all musicality of a black origin was banned, by the repression of participants in movements and political parties linked to racial issues. From the rural regions *son* spreads and reaches the capital as a result of the populations movements or of soldiers sent from one region to another in the island (ROY, 2003, p. 127-129). In these years the genre benefits from publicity, including abroad, mainly through two great musical groups Sexteto Habanero and o Trio Matamoros. However it was rejected by the Cuban elite.

which the choral and the soloist dialog in a repetitive way, but without repeating exactly the same thing (RIVERA, [19-], p. 10-12).

As of the publication of the *Motivos de son*, Guillén had already written a poem with a *black* theme – *Oda a Kid Chocolate* <sup>5</sup>, posteriorly included in *Sóngoro Cosongo y otros poemas* (1931) with the title *Pequena oda a um negro boxeador cubano*. In this poem, of racial exaltation verses with disjointed rhythm and language, filled with the periods neologisms, in Barreira's evaluation (2003, p. 99), states that there is a clear indictment of the exploitation, in all senses, of the Cuban boxer, as can be seen in the following transcription:

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 como una enorme lengua húmeda,  
para lamer glotonamente  
toda la sangre de nuestro cañaveral.

De seguro que tu  
no vivirás al tanto de ciertas cosas nuestras,  
ni de ciertas cosas de allá,  
porque el training es duro y el músculo traidor,  
e 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,  
solo 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,

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<sup>5</sup> Kid Chocolate was Eligio Sardiñas Montalbo (1910-1988), the most famous cuban boxer in the history of the sport, having won 100 bouts, 86 by K.O.

sudar,  
nadar,  
y de 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.  
(*Sóngoro, Cosongo*, 1931).

With support in the Dieter Reichardt's (2004) considerations on the lyrical speaker in Guillén's poetry<sup>6</sup>, we can see a quite significant difference between the poet's dialog with Kid Chocolate and the other posterior "black verses" from *Motivos de son* and *Sóngoro Cosongo*. There is, in principle, an early distancing between the poet and the character, as the first refers to the black body of the second in which he places things to build the boxer's figure "tus guantes / puestos en la punta de tu cuerpo de ardilla / y el punch de tu sonrisa", ou do posicionamento do seu corpo negro animalizado no ringue "en que tú saltas como un moderno mono elástico", onde "hay que estar hecho un toro", etc. the poet speaks to a Cuban whose home is no longer Cuba, and now is from the land of show business (Broadway). In the same way, there is a clear questioning of the use that the north American system makes of the Cuban boxer, including the introduction of English words in his small vocabulary (and knowledge) of Spanish that he, the boxer, controls.

However, even though Guillén speaks of the black man, "no logra aún la nota desde adentro", according to his friend and biographer (AUGIER, 1984, p. 94). Already at that time, the poet developed in the section *Ideales de una raza* in the *Diário de la Marina*, a fierce battle for the recognition of the black man in the country, a against the prejudice they were exposed to. Posteriorly, when this door was closed in the newspaper, Guillén started to collaborate (also with poems and articles) in the Sunday supplement of the daily *El mundo*, in the page called *La marcha de una raza*. This activity, however, was very distant from what Guillén would reach later with his poems said to be *negristas*, but up to a certain point, they defined the paths of the poetry that would open in the following months.

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<sup>6</sup> Reichardt supports this with the initial poem of *Cerebro y Corazón*, comparing them to the others from *Sóngoro Cosongo*.



Augier points to some of the Guillén journalistic productions as “antecedentes de su próximo rumbo poético”: the interview with composer Rosendo Ruiz, and the approximation with the North American poet Langston Hughes<sup>7</sup>, since both situated poetry in the musical universe: the first with his recent and older *sones*, the latter inserting the influences of *jazz* and *blues* in his poetic work. Therefore, posterior poems were due more to these contacts, really, than to journalistic positioning against discrimination and racism.

The poems *Motivos de son* were born of a dream like experience, according to Guillén himself. One night, he recorded in his autobiography, in a state between sleep and wakefulness, a phrase came to him, with a special rhythm: *Negro bembón*<sup>8</sup>. The phrase twirled in his head for the rest of the night, not allowing him to sleep: finally he says that he got up and immediately wrote the poem:

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

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

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

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

Guillén added that, that day, he wrote another eight or ten poems, among them *Sóngoro Cosongo*, immediately delivering them for publication, with many doubts, even asking for them to not be immediately published: “De paso diré que esta medida me fue inspirada por el temor, en realidad bien pueril, de que los versos no me

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes translated Guillén's poems, in a book called *Cuba Libre*, naming them *Cuban blues*, but modifying their meaning, according to Mônica Kaup – approximating them to issues a lot more (afro)North American than Cuban. In relation, this author refers that the proposed hybridizing Guillén, present inclusively in other poems and texts, expresses a conscience that rejects the North American segregation model: while Harlem would be the non-official capital of Black America, Havaca would be the capital of mulatto Cuba, of the miscigenated society (KAUP, 2000, p. 92-97).

<sup>8</sup> *Bembón* is an adjective that comes from *bemba* (mouth). A possible translation would be *large lipped negro*.

pertenecieran, y no hubiera hecho yo más que recordarlos desde el misterio del subconsciente” (GUILLÉN, 1982, p. 79).

The poems, in an approximate oral language form using the mannerisms of the blacks of Havana, brought the musicality of the *son*, inside a very complex rhythmic structure. Eight were published in the section *Ideales de una raza* of the newspaper *Diário de la Marina: Negro Bembón, Mi chiquita, Búcate plata, Sigue, Ayé me dijeron negro, Tu no sabe inglés, Si tu supiera, and Mulata*. Later, another three were published: *Curujey, Me bendo caro e Hay que tené boluntá*<sup>9</sup>. They are poems that express issues of the black man's popular universe, such as the one of the man that lives at the expense of a woman (*Caridad te mantiene / te lo da to*), of the woman that abandons his companion when his money finishes (*que cuando no tube plata / te corrite de bachata / sin acoddadte de mí*), of the woman who complains to her companion that there is nothing to eat while he has a “sapato nuevo”, “relo” and ther luxury items: “*búcate plata, / poqqe me boy a corre*”), or of the black man who sings his mate's qualities: “*Ella laba, plancha, cose, / y sobre to, caballero / ¡como cosina!*”, for which reason, even though she's black, he doesn't trade her for any other: “*tan negra como e, / no cambio pó ninguna, / pó ninguna outra mujé*”.

In 1931, Guillén published a small book, with these and other poems, which he named *Sóngoro Cosongo*, defining them clearly as mulatto poems. But there was more than the black Cuban's spoken language or his daily themes. In this book, the poem *Llegada*, for example, reinstated the African ancestry in the interior of the Antillean landscape, mainly expressed by the verses:

Traemos  
Nuestro rasgo al perfil definitivo de América.

On the one hand, we note a more marked concern with the indictment of the exploitation to which the black man was submitted to, in different temporalities, which appeared very clearly in a small poem where sugar cane and its plantation was the leading figure:

El negro  
junto al cañaveral.

El yanqui  
sobre el cañaveral.

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<sup>9</sup> All were included in the book *Sóngoro Cosongo*, published by Guillén in the following year, but in later editions the poet reduced them to eight again (removing *Curujey* and *Me bendo caro* and repacing *Ayé me dijeron negro* for *Hay que tené boluntá*). All eleven poems were published in *El libro de los sones* (1982), organized and foreworded by Angel Augier.

La tierra  
bajo el cañaveral.

¡Sangre  
que se nos va!

(Sóngoro Cosongo, 1931).

Augier also highlights in this little poem the accusation of the exploitation via monoculture, as the fact that the Cuban nation suffered from it from the United States, which placed the black man as a worker “junto al cañaveral”, to whom the hardest work was assigned. He highlights that the black man “podía ser cubano, pero también haitiano o jamaicano, pues que durante esos años era preciso importar brazos para la zafra, mano de obra barata que se encontraba fácilmente por los traficantes en el oscuro filón de las Antillas vecinas” (AUGIER, 1984, p. 128). In this sense, the black man referred to by Guillén would be the Cuban black or the black man *in* Cuba.

However, in these and other posterior poems, in which the historic issues of slavery and exploitation since the colonial times are discussed, it becomes clearer and clearer the concept that it is not enough to bring the cultural specificity of the popular themes in a national perspective. The question of colonial exploitation that is present in Cuba from the North American domination, can't be seen only in national terms. It can only have a revolutionary solution, as we have already pointed out, in relation to the position expressed by the poet, because culture is only one aspect relating to the global nation, and its expression doesn't allow, on its own, for the resolution of the social conflicts it unveils.

Nicolas Guillén was not exactly a pioneer in the publishing of poems with a black theme. Another two poems had already been published in 1928, preceding *Motivos de son: La Rumba* by José Zacarías Tallet, in *Atuei*, and *Bailadora de Rumba* by Ramón Guirao, in the *Diario de la Marina*. In the same occasion, Alejo Carpentier published his *Liturgia Nãñiga*, when he was still in Paris, and Alejandro García Caturra based himself in the work to write his symphonic poem *Yamba-O*. Augier establishes a distance between these works and the later “negrista” works by Guillén: for him, it was all about “notas sueltas elementales, de poetas blancos que presentan lo negro en esguinces y onomatopeyas, en ritmo y en vocabulario, en el gesto y la pirueta. Una visión externa de lo negro, pero que vale como síntoma.” (AUGIER, 1984, p. 93). Thus this author places these works in the *negrista trend* in which he does not put Guillén.

Hans-Otto Dill highlights that the interest of certain European artists (especially painters like Picasso, Klee, Kirchner) was due less to a cultural anti-

colonialism and more to the “afán vanguardista de destruir el tradicional y muy académico sistema de expresión pictórico”, em decorrência da própria crise do impressionismo e dos modos mais ou menos naturalistas de figuração (DILL, 2004, p. 52). He doesn't see any of this in Guillén's poetry, even if he recognizes the spirit of rupture characteristic of the European avant-garde.

For Martinez Estrada, “la poesía de Guillén tiene tan poco que ver con África como él mismo”, adding later: “En Guillén o africano no es una presencia sino una reminiscencia; o se en estado de pureza e inmediatez, por decirlo así, sino con elementos americanos miscigenizados,” (MARTINEZ ESTRADA, 1977, p. 13-14). Another further ahead:

Lo que Guillén siente y celebra en la gente de su raza, no es la raza misma cuanto la humillación, el relego a un plano inferior de la sociedad cubana, donde el rico y el blanco, el yanqui dueño de tierras y fábricas y el patrón de esclavos son una misma persona (MARTINEZ ESTRADA, 1977, p. 15).

It is understandable, therefore, that to the poems of *Motivos de son* others followed, discussing the historicity of the black slave presence in Cuba. As an intellectual, Guillén's referencial would therefore, white and European, and he “shows himself, in a peculiar way, immersed in certain stylistic trends that refer to the avant-garde and to the so called Hispano-American post modernism.”, concentrating basically on the musicality of the verses, that develops as a popular rhythm. Hence the reference not to afro-Cuban folklore, which, according to Hans-Otto Dill (2004, p. 53) only appears with certainty in two compositions: *Sensamayá* and *Balada del Güije* – but to the *son* as popular music, instrumentally executed, danced to and sung.

Soon after the publication of the *son* poems, in an interview given José Antonio Fernandes de Castro, Guillén states: “Me encanta el estudio del pueblo. La búsqueda de su entraña profunda. La interpretación de sus dolores y de sus goces” (Apud AUGIER, 1984, p. 109). And in a lecture at the Atenas club where he was called to position himself as to the critics made even by blacks, he completed the idea:

Insisto en afirmar que los personajes a que me estoy refiriendo circulan a nuestro lado. [...] porque en definitiva ellos no son más que gente de Cuba, sin que se trate precisamente de hombres oscuros. Entre la prosodia de un negro de la clase baja y la de un blanco de la misma condición no existe diferencia. Tienen, además, idéntica visión de la vida; poco más o menos los mismos problemas de orden sociológico, y frente a los mismos estímulos reaccionan de la misma manera (GUILLÉN apud AUGIER, 1984, p. 115).

Nancy Morejón, Cuban poet connected in many ways to him, disagrees of the inclusion of *Motivos de son* in the American post-modernist scene, as some authors wish:

La perspectiva básica de este cuaderno reside en el rigor y la profundidad con que el autor comete una exploración verbal, en cuanto a la forma; la rebeldía, de contenido, implícita en su temática. Desde esta posición, se aniquila el contexto que había sedimentado la expresión posmodernista; por lo que *Motivos de son* propone una vanguardia literaria que escapa a los límites de una definición académica del término (MOREJÓN, 1972).

In the perspective in which, according to Morejón (1972), “la vanguardia en Guillén existe en la medida en que su verso es ruptura y fundación, voluntad de estilo y rebelde del carácter nacional”, there is the incorporation of popular speech in the cultured language (as the losers language, as stated by Matínez Estrada), which enabled the poet to directly assume his condition as a black man/Cuban/ people. And more so: considering that in this work as in the following ones, “hay un tratamiento de la raza como concepto cultural y como valor ético”, according to this author, “la poesía se convierte en el espacio testimonial de su yo vital, comprometido en su yo poético.” (MOREJÓN, 1972).

Although there are no precedents for this inclusion of half-breed popular language in written poetry (cultured), it already appeared in the lyrics of the sones, guarachas, chants, etc. So, Morejón skeptically sees the positioning of some critics that in Guillén’s poetry one can read influences of Quevedo, or of Ruben Darío, or of Dadaism, surrealism, primitivism and other European movements: even if he agrees that Guillén can be considered “el más ‘español’ de los poetas cubanos”, he assures that in his work there was a conjugation of oral and written traditions, where he “mulattoed” the different Hispanic metric forms.

In an interview to Cintio Vitier, referred to by Nancy Morejón, Guillén highlighted something he had already spoken of in his autobiography.

La influencia más señalada en los Motivos (al menos para mí) es la del Sexteto Habanero<sup>10</sup> y el Trío Matamoros<sup>11</sup>. Recuerde que luego fueron personajes de mis poemas la Mujer de Antonio y Papá Montero. Hay

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<sup>10</sup> Sexteto Habanero was founded from another group called, Cuarteto Oriental. This group expanded later to a sextet, gaining the name that made them famous in 1920. They the typical instruments of the son – bongô, acoustic guitar, trê, claves, *botija*, maracás – later including a bass, and even later a (forming then the Septeto Habanero).

<sup>11</sup> One of the most influential groups from the 1920s and 1930s, started in 1925 by Miguel Matamoros, Siro Rodríguez and Rafael Cueto. From the beginning the group marked their style – the bolero-son – with well elaborated harmonies and a strong rhythmic backbone from the traditional son. Later in the 1940s, it included some singers of which the most famous was Benny Moré.

quien mencione a Langston Hughes, a la Ma Teodora hasta un tomito de guarachas cubanas, cuya primera edición es del ochentitantos. El problema importante no es recibir una influencia; lo importante es transformarla en sustancia propia, en elemento personal, en manera característica de creación" (GUILLÉN apud MOREJÓN, 2002).

This leads us then, to the question of the *son* and its influence inside this popular speech. Some authors identify an origin of *son* that goes back to the XVI century, and basing themselves in a document published in 1893, by musician Laureano Fontes, point as the oldest known the *Son de la Ma Teodora* – statement questioned today (ROY, 2003, p. 127). Others consider that this rhythm, essentially hybrid, could have come even from the Iberian Peninsula, with duly “mulattoed” formats, especially in the “verse-chorus-verse” form, as assured Radamés Giro (1995, p. 220). The word *son* would designate not only gatherings of instrument players, of a very common formation in the rural environment of Santiago de Cuba and other places, but also any “danceable music”. It propagated inclusively (but not exclusively, as some authors would want) from the displacements of the Permanent Army from 1909, but also from the internal agricultural migrations in the island (GIRO, 1995, p. 221).

Roy points out that the research conducted in the last decade by Cuban musicologist Danilo Orozco show that *son* was born around 1860 in the rural areas stuck in the ridges of the oriental region of Cuba. “Cuando las formas musicales que luego se denominarán son llegan a las zonas suburbanas de la región, a finales del siglo XIX, llevan ya la impronta afrohispana, tanto en la instrumentación como en la estructura del canto” (ROY, 2003, p. 120). This would be explained by the presence, in the oriental region, of labour of African origin (bantu and mainly daomene), both in small scale agriculture and in the mines removed from the urban centers. The runaway slaves dispersed as of the XIX century liberation wars, mixing with the black, white and mulatto population; finally, “los núcleos familiares originales en torno a los que se constituyó y transmitió el son se escindieron entre el campo y la ciudad, pero mantuvieron unas estrechas relaciones”, there being the possibility that the parties and collective dances made *son* “apareciera de forma concomitante en varios lugares, allí donde la interacción entre el campo y la ciudad y los contactos entre poblaciones blancas e de color eran los rasgos predominantes” (ROY, 2003, p. 120, 128).

In *Motivos de son*, therefore, Guillén referred to the street characters, with their language full of phonetic and grammatical deformities. There is even a clear negation of the elite cultural universe, including by the rejection of a more rationalistic vision, which can be seen in the poem *Madrigal*, reproduced below. According to Nancy Morejón: “La mujer es el medio más idóneo para llevar a cabo ese

reconocimiento estético, que tiene una inmensa carga ideológica. El pensamiento revolucionario se sirve del tema erótico para cumplirse” (MOREJÓN, 1972), as can be read in the following verses:

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

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.

On this poem of a sensible sensuality, Dieter Reichardt assures that “la intimidad del hablante tiene una función pública al negar **conscientemente** el axioma ilustrado de la emancipación humana mediante la educación no de los muslos sino de la cabeza”, pondo em relevo “el privilegio natural de la belleza negra frente a pautas culturales, disconformes o no, cuyo **enjuciamiento** ya por si constituye en un acto de autoridad cultural” (REICHARDT, 2004, p. 26-27 – grifos do autor).

In the same way, in this other *Madrigal*, published in the same work, the sensuality of the female black body appeared symbolized in the ripe fruits and the image (very feminine) of the mirror:

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

Piel,  
carne de tronco quemado,  
que cuando naufraga en el espejo, ahúma  
las algas tímidas del fondo.  
(Sóngoro Cosongo, 1931).

Or bringing womanliness to a mythical collective, for the exaltation of racial pride, in which the black woman – body, speech, movement – went on to symbolize the permanence and the continuity of the group, in a *wholeness* perspective, as her body marks out the world, as in *Mujer Nueva*:

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.

Bajo un pedazo de piel fresca,  
y el pie incansable  
para la pista profunda del tambor.  
(Sóngoro Cosongo, 1931)

Even the issues of the body that implied prejudice inside the black and mulatto groups were tackled in the *Motivos de son*, as in *Mulata*, in which, the devaluation of certain traits, such as the flat nose, is referred to, as well as a negation of a whitening possibility, evident in the ascending social groups:

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

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

Tanto ren con tu cuerpo,  
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 na!  
(Motivos de son, 1930)

More than bringing the black to white rationality, therefore, Guillén stated the concrete possibility of defining black identity having as a base the cultural differences, this way distancing himself from the European cultural traditions and basing himself in the popular traditions. Thus, as highlighted by Schmidt-Welle, by resorting to ethnicity, Guillén does so as a *political action*, and not simply as an increase in value of the cultural difference of the Caribbean people (SCHMIDT-WELLE, 2004, p. 5).

For Martinez Estrada, even though Guillén expresses himself in Spanish, his place is not among the Hispanic poets, as he is essentially Cuban. The stylistic breaks,



with the use of onomatopoeias, repetition, metaphors, “jitanjáforas”<sup>12</sup>, express “la cultura arcaica de los pueblos ágrafos y las modulaciones de sentimientos que no necesitan obligatoriamente de la palabra; menos del idioma, que es la palabra organizada” (MARTINEZ ESTRADA, 1977, p. 20-21). In this sense, being dialectal, he expresses himself in the loser’s language, therefore without the vassalage to the winners language. His mulatto poetry, therefore, reflects the way the Cuban people feel and speak.

Feeling and sensations are not expressed necessarily through words, but through onomatopoeias and modulations that suggest rhythm and dances, articulating the body and the written text, which will be continued in later works:

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

(*Motivos de son*, 1930)

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
(*West Indies, Ltd*, 1934).

Therefore, not only the poems sought to translate the musicality of the *sones* and of the other popular rhythms, as they were almost an invitation to be put into music.

In the preface to one of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary special edition of the *Motivos de son*, book where the noted music of the composers who put the poems into music (Amadeo Roldán, Alejandro García Caturla, Eliseo e Emilio Grenet), Mirta Aguirre (1979) places in the foreground, an approximation of Guillén’s poems to the musical structures of *son*. This rhythm or musical genre, according to her, begins with a quatrain, normally of octosyllabic verses, in which the theme is stated; it follows with the development of the base idea, in combinations of four verses or of free verses, followed by the chorus (*montuno*) and sometimes more than four verses that finished the statement. In the poem *Mulata*, reproduced above, quoted by Mirta Aguirre as an good academic example of this structure.

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<sup>12</sup> According to the mexican writer Alfonso Reyes, this term designated words or phrases with no unequivocal or explicit meaning, even though they had a melodic or rhythmic sound that transmitted similar sensations. It would be placed between a neologism and an onomatopoeia (SORONDO, 2008, p. 38-39).

But not all guillenian *sones* follow this structure, because the poet, tampering in the field of Cuban popular culture, handles the Spanish language and speaks as much with poetic written tradition as with the musical one. Bringing flesh and bone characters or from popular imagination and inspiring himself in popular musical productions, bringing to the written universe characters like Mama Inês <sup>13</sup> or Papá Montero <sup>14</sup> - he reflected on this popular universe, palcing himself as an actor and co-participant. As concluded by Mirta Aguirre: “Lo que sucede es que el poeta no inventa, sino que desprende de la realidad sus creaciones. Sus criaturas y la problemáticas de cada una de ellas existen, y él las apresa con garra inolvidable” (AGUIRRE, 1979, p. 18).

In his autobiography, Guillén refers to the musicalizing done by several composers of his *Motivos de son*. In the popular music field, brothers Emilio and Eliseo Grenet did that<sup>15</sup>. Their musical pieces had a quite significant diffusion, were often played – which caused to forgive even the fact that the composers registered both the music and lyrics as their own, which caused the loss of copyright gains to the poet, as he stated. Grenet also musicalized *Yambambó* or *Canto Negro*, and *Quirino*, poem in which Guillén alludes to an instrument associated with *son*, the tres. One should highlight that *Mulata* and *Negro Bembón* also received music from the camagueynian popular music composer, Jorge González Allué, among many other composers from the period of the poem’s publication.

Another dialog between this literature and its musicality happened in the direction of classical music. In the first decades of the XX century, according to Alejo Carpentier, a new way of thinking and seeing also became present in the cultural life of Cuba, making its musicians eyes turn to the avant-garde European productions (and even Latin American), and the island was also seen by artists form different traditions and cultures (CARPENTIER, 1993).

The classical composers, in Cuba, as in other Latin American countries, turned to popular productions, especially to the ones that brought elements from the black cultural universe, incorporating them in their pieces as reworks. In the case of Cuba, literature, especially Guillén’s poetry, was used as a bridge for this reformulation, through the presence of music in its interior – allowing for the composers to reach it in different ways.

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to *Mama Inês*, de Eliseo Grenet, recorded, among others by Bola de Nieve (the black pianist Ignacio Villa). Guillén quotes the character in the poem *Ayé me dijeron negro*, included in *El libro de los sones*.

<sup>14</sup> It is about Papá Montero, composition by Eliseo Grenet. Guillén writes *Velorio de Papá Montero*, with one common verse with the song: ¡*Zumva, canalla y rumbero!*

<sup>15</sup> In the book *Motivos de Son* (1980) the sheet notation for *Negro Bembón*, by Eliseo Grenet, and *Tu no sabe inglés* by Emilio Grenet are presented.

Since the first decades of the century, Cuban composers had already sought to incorporate Afro-Cuban folklore elements to the music produced in Cuba – for example, the *Danzas Africanas*, by Ernesto Lecuona (1895-1963), or the opera *La esclava*, by José Mauri Esteve (1856-1937). This also happened from the exterior: in 1932, the North American composer Ira Gershwin (1896-1983) composed *Abertura Cubana*, after a trip to the country, impressed mainly with the percussion instruments that he had known. On the other hand, the view on popular productions was occasioned by the possibilities opened by contemporary music, that influenced Amadeo Roldán, Villa Lobos, Lorenzo Fernandes and other composers from Brazil.

*Motivos de son*, in the 1930s were still put to music by composer Amadeo Roldán, instead of the one that would have been Guillén's choice, because he was a personal friend: Alejandro García Caturla (who ended up only putting music to *Tu no sabe inglés*)<sup>16</sup>. But it's worth noting the relation of Cuban Classical music with Nicolás Guillén's poetic works and the approximation of musical and literary avant-garde, and also note, even if briefly, the role of these two composers in this process

According to José Aníbal Campos:

Impulsado por las nuevas corrientes del arte, la literatura y la música que llegaban desde Europa, comienza a gestarse paralelamente un fuerte movimiento de renovación cultural que se extenderá a lo largo de toda esa década y continuará luego en el decenio siguiente, e una de cuyas vertientes, sin duda la de mayor trascendencia, consistirá en una nueva mirada hacia el componente africano de la nacionalidad cubana, tendencia que recibe, en el propio escenario de la Isla, un impulso definitivo a través del auge arrollador de la cultura popular y de las investigaciones antropológicas y etnográficas de don Fernando Ortiz. Es el momento en que poetas como Emilio Ballasgas, Nicolás Guillén o José Zacarías Tallet, entre otros, comienzan a poblar las letras cunas de cadencias y sonidos de tambor, maracas y bongó. Pero es la en la música donde esa renovación comienza a sentirse con mayor fuerza (CAMPOS, 2005, p. 216).

But this movement for the nationalization of Cuban classical music goes even further. Above all the formal freedom brought by the influence of Stravinsky and other composers who propitiated the release of the academic dogmas still in place in the XIX century. On the other hand, the creation of music conservatories and choral societies were key ingredients that boosted this musical renovation. Two movements converged: on the one hand, the investment in the increase of musical knowledge by the diffusion of classical music by the formation of orchestras and investment in the musicians'

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<sup>16</sup> Caturla e Roldán also put top music works by other Cuban authors, among which the Afronegrist poems by de Alejo Carpentier.

formation, and on the other the looking inwards of the Cuban society, to learn the essential elements of musical nationalization.

The two names that became references in this project, however, were Amadeo Roldán (1900-1939) and Alejandro García Caturla (1906-1940).

The first had classical musical formation in Europe, returning to Cuba in 1919. There, he integrated the second orchestra founded in the capital by Pedro Sanjuan Nortes, the *Filarmonica* (que estabeleceu uma concorrência com a anterior, a *Sinfônica*). This conductor had already composed a *Liturgia Negra*, using themes and folkloric instrumentals, which opened the way for the presentation of the *Obertura sobre temas cubanos*, by Roldán, considered by Carpentier the most important event in the Cuban musical history since the beginning of that century, even though it was still an immature work. Little by little, the composer affirmed himself, preferring to work with folklore themes using second hand material – detaching himself, therefore, from the true folkloric document, as Carpentier documented: “el ritmo ha dejado de ser textual: es más bien una visión propia de las células conocidas: recreación [...] buscando, más que un folklore, el espíritu del folklore” (CARPENTIER, 1993, p. 315). In 1931, Roldán put to music the poem *Curujey*, by Guillén. In 1934 were published in New York the other musicalized eight poems from *Motivos de Son*, and, according to Carpentier:

[...] a pesar de un trabajo instrumental elaboradísimo, la melodía conserva todos sus derechos. Melodía angulosa, quebrada, sometida muy a menudo a las características tonales del género, pero donde lo negro es ya, para Roldán, un lenguaje propio; proyectado de adentro afuera (CARPENTIER, 1993, p. 316).

Alejandro García Caturla was of the same period having played in the same orchestra then directed by Roldán. He was a friend of Nicolás Guillén, who dedicated the *Canto Negro* to him, firstly published as *Yambambó*. By the poet's wish, Caturla should have put to music all the *Motivos de son*, only having done it in relation to *Bito Manué* (*Tu no sabe inglés*) in 1930, and *Mulata* in 1932 (*Motivos de Son*, 1980), since Roldán had taken the lead, in this sense. Later, Caturla put to music other Guillén's poems.

According to Carpentier, folklore, for Caturla, represented a starting point where he returned to expressing himself as a composer, differently from Roldán. In other words:

Salido de su corta fiebre europeizante, [Caturla] volvió a los *danzones* de su adolescencia, partiendo de ellos nuevamente. Sin vacilación, comenzó a expresarse en un lenguaje nutrido por raíces negras – guiado por un oscuro instinto y por las afinidades que se habían manifestado ya, de modo elocuente, en su vida privada (CARPENTIER, 1993, p. 320).

That might be the reason for the identification of Guillén with Caturla, with whom he frequently corresponded and met whenever possible, as he states in his biography. Even though both composers were inside the “cultured” denomination, Caturla managed to encompass more of what the poet valued in the writing profession (both poetry and music): the experiences of the popular process of the Cuban people in a politicized way. He faced the prejudice of the period, marrying a black woman. Besides being a musician he was also a lawyer fighting to support a numerous family, and was murdered while exercising the profession.

In short, the putting to music of Guillén’s poems written in those years, clearly assumes the role of introducing in national classical music the themes, rhythms and Afro Cuban harmonies or more specifically the black ones. Through the poets approximation with popular music, in other words, music effectively produced and composed in the rural areas and mainly in the cities, this popular sound penetrated although in a differentiated way, in the musical universe of authors such as Alejandro García Caturla, allowing for approximations that otherwise wouldn’t be possible. The important thing is to highlight that the direction given by Guillén to this poetry/music relationship was much more directed towards the popular – and a politically engaged popular – than towards the classical. Other poems by Guillén were put to music by Cuban composers such as Jorge Berroa, Hilario González, Jorge González Allué, Maria Alvarez Rios, Walfrido Guevara, Amaury Gutierrez, among others.

In conclusion, one can complement stating that Guillén’s poetry didn’t interest only Cuban authors. The need to incorporate black themes by non-Cuban musicians and composers’ productions made some of them come closer to the poet’s literary production. Mexican Silvestre Revueltas (1909-1940), for example, put to music *Caminando* and *Sensamayá* (from *West Indies, Ltd.*). In 1945, a Catalan composer, Xavier Montsalvatge (1912-2002), when composing the suite called *Cinco Canciones Negras*<sup>17</sup>, sought to build an Atlantic bridge for this purpose, uniting America and Europe. For that, he put to music the poem *Cuba dentro de un piano*, by the Spaniard Rafael Alberti; *Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito*, by the Uruguayan Idelfonso

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<sup>17</sup> In the following order: I. Cuba dentro de un piano – Rafael Alberti; II. Punto de Habanera (Siglo XVIII) Nestor Luján; III. Chévere – Nicolás Guillén; IV. Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito – Idelfonso Pereda Valdés; V. Canto negro – Nicolás Guillén

Pareda Valdés; *Chévere e Canto Negro*, by Nicolás Guillén, and *Punto de Habanera (século XI)*, by Nestor Luján <sup>18</sup>. Poems by Guillén were also put to music by Marius François Gaillard, Darius Milhaud, Edgar Varese, in a movement that we can consider as supra-national, or universal nationalism, as proposed by Quintero-Rivera. (QUINTERO-RIVERA, 2000, p. 30-54). And this if we limit ourselves only to the classical composers, since Guillén's poems are still sung today by Latin American artists and others, from the politico-musical references, discussion which isn't part of the objectives of this article.

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<sup>18</sup> Gathered by Nestor Luján, Josep M. Prim e Xavier Montsalvatge among fishermen-singers in Calella de Palafrugell, in Catalunya.

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