

NEGRO POETRY IN THE AMERICAS

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[*Author's Summary.*—The Negro has written verse since colonial times. In North America his most characteristic expression is the spiritual and religious verse based on the Bible. But in Latin America his religious verse is based on African cults, and there is nothing comparable to the North American Negro spirituals. The Latin American Negro's love of rhythm finds expression in song and dance, and these rhythms have been used by the new poets, notably Nicolás Guillén.]

WHEN one speaks of Negro poetry in the United States, one immediately thinks of the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. His use of Negro dialect and realistic psychology reveals the way of life of the American Negro. In *When the Co'n Pone's Hot* he gives us a delightful picture of family life:

When you set down at the table,
Kind o' weary lak an' sad,
An' you'se jes' a little tiahed
An' perhaps a little mad;
How yo' gloom tu'ns into gladness,
How yo' joy drives out de doubt
When de oven do' is opened,
And de smell comes po'in out:
Why, de 'lectric light o' Heaven
Seems to settle on de spot,
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
And de co'n pone's hot.

As far as I know, there is nothing like this in the countries of Latin America. There are other types of Negro verse, however, which are extremely interesting.

The Negro has written verse since colonial times. In Latin America colonial poetry was cast in Spanish and Portuguese molds, in North America it followed English models. In Mexico a poet known as "El Negrito" wrote verse that resembled that of Quevedo. In Boston Phyllis Wheatley wrote verse that recalls English poets of the period. Although it contains little of what we now consider truly Negro, the author was undoubtedly the first Negro woman poet of our land. Of her journey to America in a slave-ship she wrote:

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God and there's a Saviour too.

These lines indicate clearly what was to be one of the paths Negro poetry was to take in our country, the path of religion. In his Preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, J. Weldon Johnson, one of our leading Negro poets, says that the Negro spirituals constitute the most important body of North American folksong. Spirituals are more important musically than poetically, yet they represent what has become one of the characteristic notes of Negro literature in the United States, the original interpretation of the Bible. In the spirituals and other Negro poetry of biblical theme, there is an intimate and familiar relationship between the Negro, God, and the characters of the Bible. Thus we often have an infantile interpretation of the Bible. A good example of this childish explanation of the Bible is Alex Rogers' *Why Adam Sinned*:

Adam nevuh had no Mammy, fuh to take him on huh knee
 An' teach him right fom wrong an' show him
 Things he ought to see;
 I knows down in ma heart—he'd a let dat apple be,
 But Adam nevuh had no dear old Ma-am-my.

This very amusing and personal comment on the Bible would not have been possible in Latin America, where the Catholic Church kept watch over the purity of the faith. During the colonial period the Spanish and Portuguese were fighting Judaism, Protestantism, Illuminism, and other "isms." They could not afford to let the Bible circulate freely. The Inquisition put on the Index any version of the Bible not approved by the Council of Trent. There was too much danger that ignorant people would misinterpret it. In North America, even if the Negro could not read, his white master could, and so could the Negro preacher. Thus the North American Negro came to know his Bible. He talked to God like a child to his father. On the other hand, in the countries to the south there is nothing resembling the spirituals or the religious poetry of the North American Negro.

The well-known Cuban writer, Fernando Ortiz, mentions community singing in Protestant churches as a factor in the production of spirituals in the United States.¹ It is much easier to imagine a Protestant musical background for the spirituals than one of Gregorian chant and plainsong. A lusty revival hymn like *Throw Out the Life Line* is much closer in spirit to *Somebody Got Lost in the Storm* than the dignified chant or highly developed music of the Catholic Mass. The minor key and the pentatonic

¹ See "La religión en la poesía mulata" in *Estudios afrocubanos*, Havana, 1937, I, 19 ff.

scale identify the spiritual as Negro, but the sentiment expressed makes it Baptist or Methodist. It is true that there are modern spiritittals based on such hymns as Cardinal Newman's *Lead, Kindly Light*, but they are not characteristic. They lack the vigor of "cottonpatch salvation."

In Latin America the black man could not find this type of religious expression in the rites of the Catholic Church. This he could only find in his own pagan rites and dances. The Negroes of Bahía still worship their gods of Slave Coast origin, Shangó, Obatalá, and others, in wild orgies called *candomblé*.² In Cuba too these pagan rites have survived. They link up with the voodoo rites of New Orleans and the cult of Father Divine in New York, except that in Cuba it is Mother Divine, Yemayá, or some other African deity that forms the center of Negro cults. Therefore really typical Afro-Cuban poetry of a religious nature deals with magic and magic charms. Ortiz gives *Sensemaya* as a characteristic example.³ It is an incantation to kill a snake.

The Bible, then, plays little part in Latin American Negro poetry, except in recent poets like Pedroso who use it for ironical purposes.⁴ Like Alfred de Vigny they challenge God and ask Him to justify His ways to man. There are sporadic examples, of course, of conventional religious poetry in the Christian tradition, as for instance Plácido's famous *Plegaria*. But a modern *Plegaria* by Gastón Figueira, though based on the Lord's Prayer, is much more characteristic. It is addressed not to God but to Mother Divine, in this case the tropical moon:

Luna Madre Nuestra que estás en los cielos,
venga a nos tu reino de consolación.
Danos cada noche nuestro pan de ensueño
y resignación.
Perdona en nosotros la diaria impureza
como perdonamos el diario desdén.
Por más que nos hiera la sed de Belleza,
de toda blasfemia libranos.

Amén.⁵

In Latin America one can not imagine a poem like James E. Campbell's *When O' Sis' Judy Pray*:

² See the article by Ortiz above cited and also "Rituales de los afroamericanos" by Ildefonso Pereda Valdés in *Línea de color*, Santiago de Chile, 1938, 115 ff.

³ *Op. cit.*, 40. The author is Nicolás Guillén.

⁴ This use of the Bible also occurs in recent North American Negro verse. Countee Cullen writes in *Black Magdalens*:

These have no Christ to spit and stoop
To write upon the sand,
Inviting him that has not sinned.
To raise the first rude hand.

⁵ *Geografía poética de América*, V: *Alba en la playa de los mil cocoteros*, Buenos Aires, 1939, 64.

When ol' Sis' Judy pray,
 De teahs come stealin' down my cheek,
 De voice ur God widin me speak;
 I see myse'f so po' an' weak,
 Down on my knees de cross I seek,
 When ol' Sis' Judy pray.

Nor will one find anything like *The Creation* by J. Weldon Johnson.

It is only within recent years that the Latin American Negro has developed any poetry comparable in creative genius to that of the North American Negro. In the new poetry he expresses eroticism, love of rhythm, and typical Negro attitudes and feelings. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this new poetry is rhythm. The Latin American Negro, like his North American brother, loves to sing and dance. And it is this festival spirit of song and dance that the new poetry reproduces. Sometimes it is the languid sensualism of the Cuban *son*, sometimes the mad whirl of the *rumba*, or the stomp and the shout of more warlike measures like the *batuque*.⁶

One of the new poets is Nicolás Guillén, best representative of Afro-Cuban poetry. He translates the very soul of the Cuban Negro in his *sones*. He is able to express with words the contorsions of the dance and the rhythm of the music.⁷ He uses the corrupt Spanish of the Negro and even some African words. But it is not necessary to understand the words because the rhythm tells it all:

Tamba, tamba, tamba, tamba,
 Tamba del negro que tumba;
 Tumba del negro caramba,
 Caramba, que el negro tumba:
 Yamba, yambó, yambambé.⁸

This fragment from *Canto negro* recalls the "boomlay, boomlay," of Vachel Lindsay's *Congo*. The sound effect of the Cuban poem is amazing. It is based on explosives to give a characteristic "jazz" note and to reproduce the sound of the drum and percussion instruments. It is a kind of verbal surrealism and has no pictorial value at all. It is rhythm and sound, nothing more.

These dances in verse bear a certain resemblance to our "jazz," except that our "jazz," our "hot jazz," is more varied. It has certain unexpected explosions and is composed of a great variety of instruments. In the Cuban

⁶ For a description of these dances see Pereda Valdés, "Las danzas frenéticas de los negros del Brasil," *op. cit.*, 175 ff, and the same author's "Nicolás Guillén y el ritmo del son," *op. cit.*, 143 ff.

⁷ The dictionary defines the *son* as "baile de origen africano y maneras indecentes."

⁸ See *Antología de la poesía negra americana* by Pereda Valdés, Santiago de Chile, 1936, 114.

dances the music is more monotonous and primitive.⁹ It has not had the artistic elaboration that our ragtime enjoys in the work of Dvorak and Ravel.

Sometimes Guillén combines a dance and a love poem. *Si tu supiera . . .* has a refrain built on sibilants. The dance is the *songo*, and this word is repeated in various forms to produce an effect of monotony:

Ay, negra,
 ¡si tú supiera!
 Anoche te bi pasá
 y no quise que me biera.

A é tú le hará como a mí,
 que en cuanto no tube plata
 te corrite de bachata
 sin acodahte de mí.

Sóngoro, cosongo
 songo be;
 sóngoro, cosongo
 de mamey;
 sóngoro, la negra
 baila bien;
 sóngoro de uno,
 sóngoro de tre.¹⁰

This is quite different from Dunbar's *Negro Love Song*, though Dunbar too tried to suggest a dance in his refrain:

Seen my lady home las' night,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
 Hel' huh han' an' sque'ze it tight,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
 Hyeahed huh sigh a little sigh,
 Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,
 An' a smile go flittin' by—
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Guillén's *sones* also differ from North American Negro dance songs, which are after all only folksongs. There are closer points of contact between the Cuban poet and some of our own contemporary Negro poets; as for example, Charles McKay in *The Harlem Dancer*.

Guillén's *sones* are sometimes psychologically suggestive as well as rhythmically convincing. In *Mulata* he gives us a perfect picture of a flirt:

Tanto tren con tu cueppo,
 tanto tren;

⁹ The dictionary defines the music of the *son* as "ruido sordo, seco y monótono de tambor."

¹⁰ *Antología*, 111-112. Poems throughout this paper are reproduced only in part.

tanto tren con tu boca,
tanto tren;
tanto tren con tu sojo,
tanto tren;

Si tu supiera, mulata,
la beddá:
que yo con mi negra tengo
y no te quiero pa na.¹¹

And in *Búcate plata* we have a convincing picture of a colored girl who is looking for a rich husband:

pero amó con hambre, biejo,
¡ qué ba !
con tanto sapato nuevo,
¡ qué ba !
con tanto reló, compadre,
¡ qué ba !
con tanto lujo, mi negro,
¡ qué ba !¹²

Guillén's *sones* strike an original note in Negro poetry. They are neither white nor black but a synthesis of African and creole elements. Or to quote Juan Marinello, "encontramos en él nuestro ayer, nuestro presente y nuestro mañana."¹³

Marcelino Arozarena, another writer of song and dance rhythms in verse, expresses more frenzied eroticism than one finds in Guillén. In *Caridá* we have the mad whirl of the rumba:

La epilepsia rimbombante que revuelve sus entrañas,
el sopor electrizante que le endulza la emoción,
resquebraja su cintura
y la exprime con locura
en la etiópica dulzura del sabroso guanguancó,
que es embrujo en el reflujó de la sangre azucarada
y es espasmo en el marasmo del trepidante bongó.¹⁴

La rumba by Tallet, on the other hand, is the best pictorial representation of that dance:

Como baila la rumba la negra Tomasa
como baila la rumba José Encarnación.

¹¹ *Idem*, 109.

¹² *Idem*, 107.

¹³ In "Hazaña y triunfo americanos de Nicolás Guillén," *Literatura hispano-americana*, México, 1937, 89.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 103.

Ella mueve una nalga, ella mueve la otra,
 él se estira, se encoge, dispara la grupa,
 el vientre dispara, se agacha, camina
 sobre el uno y el otro talón.¹⁵

In Brazil, too, dance and song is a characteristic expression of the Negro soul. Some of their dances represent in a symbolic way the rites of black magic. Some are war dances. One of the most famous of the war dances is the *batuque*. It is a challenge, and consists of song, music, the contorsions of the dance and the blows of the dancers. The best interpretation I have found in Spanish verse is that of the Uruguayan poet Gastón Figueira, a true lover of Brazil and her tropical charm. Figueira is not, as far as I know, a Negro, yet he writes what Cuban critics would probably call synthetic Negro verse. These critics insist that there is no Negro poetry since no Negro or African language has survived; that there is only mulatto, negroid, and synthetic Negro verse.¹⁶ By the same token there is no Negro poetry in the United States. Yet who would deny that Dunbar wrote Negro poetry? Or who doubts that Stephen Foster caught the spirit of Negro song?

Unlike Nicolás Guillén, Figueira gives not only the auditory values of the dance, the shuffle of the Negroes, the shouting of the crowd and the instruments that accompany the dance; but the pictorial values and the social background as well. The result is a verbal jazz symphony. A few lines of his *Batuque* will give some idea of the effect:

¡Batuque, batuque, batuque,
 rimbombo
 del bombo!
 El jongo
 zumba
 y retumba
 como en una noche del Congo.
 Chiqui-chá, chiqui-chá del maracá,
 caracaxá, kerekexé, canzá.

· · · · ·
 Y parece que la roja noche tropical
 se llena de un grito sediento:
 "Bailemos y cantemos
 —majumbé, majumbarilá—

¹⁵ See *Orbita de la poesía afrocubana 1928-1937, Antología*, by Ramón Guirao, Havana, 1938, 65 ff.

¹⁶ For some opinions on this subject see Fernando Ortiz, "Más acerca de la poesía mulata . . .," in *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, XXXVII, Havana, 1936. He speaks of the *Lamento* by Palés Matos as "versos blancos con tatuajes negros"; Tallet's *La rumba* is "arte blanco con motivos negros"; Guillén's *Canto negro* and *Sóngoro cosongo* are mulatto. Also see Gilberto González y Contreras, "La poesía negra," in the same number.

que *el señor del ingenio* ya no aparecerá,
 no nos castigará.
 Bailemos y cantemos
 —ohé-ohá, jui-jé, jui-já—
 que mañana es *carnival*.”
 Zumba y retumba del jongo,
 rimbombo del bombo,
 chiqui-chá, chiqui-chá del maracá,
 chiqui-chá, chiqui-chá, canzá, kerekexé, caracaxá,
 —*el señor del ingenio* ya muerto está. . . .¹⁷

The *chiqui-chá* refrain is the sound made by the *maracas*,¹⁸ gourds filled with stones and rattled as an accompaniment to the dance.

The *samba*, too, has found expression in verse. Gilka Machado, a woman poet of Brazil, has probably written the best interpretation of that dance:

Mexendo com as ancas,
 batendo com os pés,
 trementes os seios,
 virados os olhos,
 os dentes espiando
 a todos e a tudo,
 brilhantes,
 brilhantes,
 por dentro dos lábios,
 —crioula ou cafusa,
 cabocla ou mulata
 mestiça ou morena—
 não te ama somente quem nunca te viu
 dansando,
 sambando,
 nas noites de lua,
 mulher do Brasil!¹⁹

It is in the poetry of racial protest that recent Latin American Negro poetry bears the closest resemblance to our own. The United States has its Langston Hughes, its Charles McKay; Cuba its Regino Pedroso; Argentina its Casildo Thompson. Nicolás Guillén, too, writes of the race problem. The slave-ship, far from symbolizing hope and redemption as it did for Phyllis Wheatley, is a shadow that still hangs over him. He can not forget the slave-ships. So many ships, so many Negroes bending over the oars under the lash of the galley slave-driver. The slaves shout and sing, cry and sing to unburden their souls. This sublimation of the Negro's sorrow is also

¹⁷ See *Alba en la playa de los mil cocoteros*, 5-6.

¹⁸ In Cuba the word is pronounced *maraca*. Figueira derives it from the Guaraní *mbaraca, calabaza*. See "Acotaciones," *op. cit.*, 103.

¹⁹ See *A nova literatura brasileira, crítica e antologia* by Andrade Muricy, Porto Alegre, 1936, 77.

expressed by Figueira in *Tatuaje negro*; and in *Maracatú* he says:

El blues, la rumba y el maracatú
son hermanos.
El dolor de nuestros abuelos,
en ritmos transformaron.²⁰

But the sorrow is always there. No matter what the Negro does, he can not forget the tragedy of his race:

Negro—
quando cava, quando cansa,
quando pula, quando tomba,
quando grita, quando dansa,
quando brinca, quando zomba
sente gana de chorá. . . .

Negro—
quando nasce, quando cresce,
quando luta, quando corre,
quando sobe, quando desce,
quando *vêve*, quando morre,
negro pena sem *pará*. . . .²¹

Thus Murilo Araújo sums up the Negro's suffering.

But today the Negro also thinks. He thinks not only about his own problems but those of society in general. Guillén's *Soldado muerto* is an excellent example of the black man's ironical observation of life:

¡Chin! ¡Chin! ¡Chin!
AQUÍ VA EL SOLDADO MUERTO.
¡Chin! ¡Chin! ¡Chin!
DE LA CALLE LO TRAJERON.
¡Chin! ¡Chin! ¡Chin!
EL SOLDADO ES LO DE MENOS.
¡Chin! ¡Chin! ¡Chin!
QUE MÁS SOLDADOS TENEMOS.²²

Caña is his ironical evaluation of American exploitation:

El negro
junto al cañaveral.

El yanqui
sobre el cañaveral.

La tierra
bajo el cañaveral.

²⁰ *Alba en la playa de los mil cocoteros*, 17-18, 58-59.

²¹ "Toada do negro no banzo," in *A nova literatura brasileira*, 118-119.

²² From *Cantos para soldados* by Nicolás Guillén, México, 1937, 27-28.

Sangre
que se nos va.²³

The racial bond is strong today between the Latin American Negro and his northern brother. This is well expressed by Regino Pedroso, leading interpreter of Cuba's race problem, in *Hermano negro*:

Negro, hermano negro,
enluta un poco tu bongó.

Aprende aquí,
y escucha allí,
y mira allá, en Scottsboro, en Scottsboro, en Scottsboro,
Bajo vestidos de piel negra,
hombres que sangran.

Negro, hermano negro,
más hermano en el ansia que en la raza,
negro en Haiti, negro en Jamaica, negro en New York,
negro en la Habana . . .

—dolor que en vitrinas negras vende la explotación—
escucha allá, en Scottsboro, en Scottsboro, en Scottsboro. . . .
Da al mundo con tu angustia rebelde,
tu humana voz . . .
¡y apaga un poco tus maracas! . . .²⁴

One must not jump to the conclusion that the Negro poetry of Latin America is only the poetry of a race. In modern as in colonial times there have been poets who used European technique and subject-matter. The first modernist of Brazil, Cruz e Sousa, did not, like Paul Laurence Dunbar, let himself be carried away by the exotic charm of his race. He stayed, rather, within the limits of European tradition and produced poetry that is truly artistic. His motto was "Art for Art's sake" and his models were the Parnassian poets of France. His work was so superior to that of other poets of his time in Brazil and Portugal that it produced storms of criticism. But it has lived and will always be a landmark of Brazilian literature.

These are some of the principal avenues of expression which Negro poetry has developed in the Americas. Negro poetry in Latin America is still in its infancy. Who shall say what new forms it will produce in the future?

GLOSSARY

bachata, carousal
batuque, popular Afro-Brazilian dance
bombo, drum

²³ Pereda Valdés, *Antología*, 111.

²⁴ *Antología*, 121-124.

bongó, Afro-Cuban drum
cabocla, native woman
cafusa, daughter of a mulatto and a negress
candomblé, dance popular in Brazil among Negro creoles
canzá, see *maraca*
caracaxá, see *maraca*
congo, Cuban dance by couples
guanguancó, festival of *rumba* dancing
jongo, Afro-Brazilian dance
kerekexé, onomatopoeic for *maraca*
jui-já, jui-jé, shouts
majumbarilá, shouts
majumbebé, shouts
maraca, gourd
maracatú, street parade and Afro-Brazilian dance
ohé-ohá, shouts
rumba, Cuban national dance
samba, most popular dance of Brazil
son, Cuban dance
songo, Cuban dance
tamba, onomatopoeic
tumba, dance festival
yamba, yambó, etc., onomatopoeic

WASTED ASSETS

What a waste it would be to throw away the possibilities which come freely to this country in every ship, possibilities of understanding and beauty. Take the matter of language, for instance. Of course the foreign-born citizen must learn English as quickly as possible . . . but why should he make such panic-stricken haste to discard his own tongue? I know many second-generation Americans who cannot speak a word of their parents' native language. I should be sorry if my own children were to be deprived of the great classics of their own and other peoples' ancestors. There again America impoverishes herself. We could and should speak many languages, naturally, easily—and so understand all peoples better than we do.—DR. HANS KINDLER, *Director of the National Symphony Orchestra, Washington, D.C.* (an American citizen born in Holland), in *I Am An American*, by Famous Naturalized Americans, New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1941.