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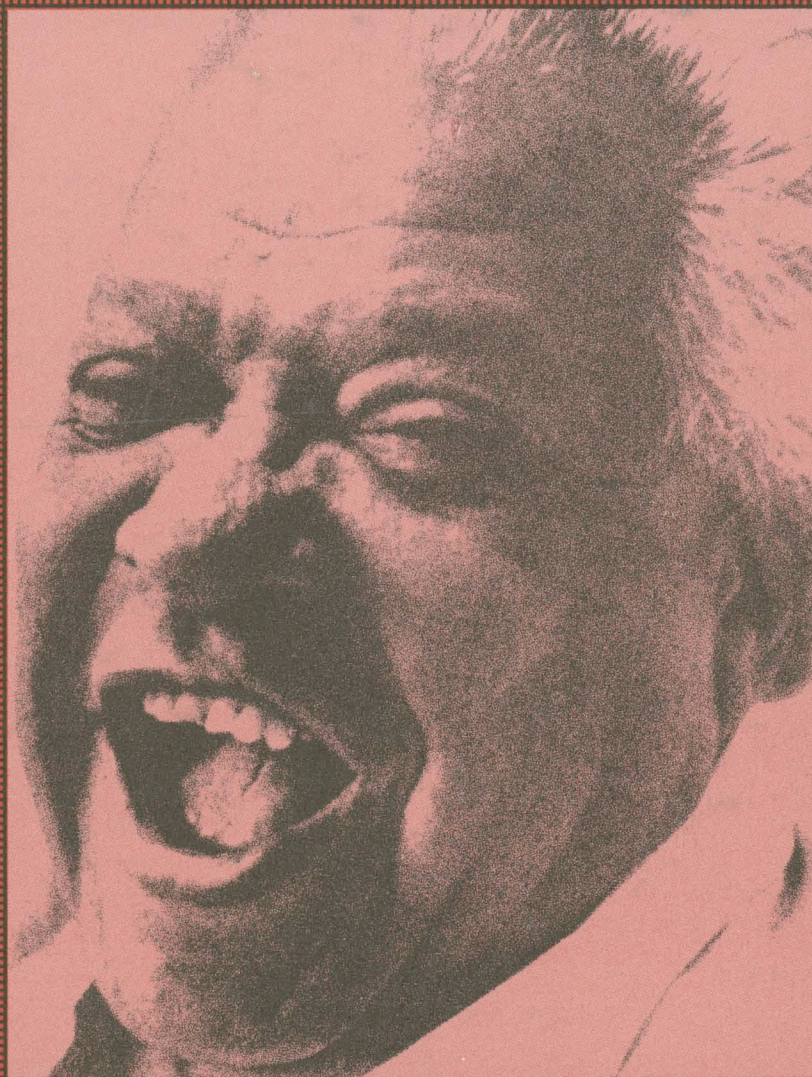
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# NICOLÁS GUILLEN

## poet laureate of revolutionary Cuba



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In January, 1979 I had the good fortune to visit Cuba during a trip sponsored by the Center for Cuban Studies, a cultural and educational organization in New York City. Beyond just my natural curiosity about everything Cuban in this new society, I did have certain specific hopes and one was to be able to meet the great poet Nicolás Guillén.

One day, during a break at a very informal and informative meeting set up for us at the Writer's Union, I had been speaking with the Secretary asking him if he thought it would be possible to speak with Mr. Guillén and he said, "Go ahead, here he comes now." On an already beautiful sunny day, the presence of Mr. Guillén radiated additional warmth and brightness. I explained to him my desire to bring back his words in his own voice. This record represents some of the material which he so generously made available to me.

I would like to dedicate this album to Jane Wood, mi compañera, who has devoted her life to promoting the values of social equality, and who helped me record music and poetry in Cuba, land of courage, strength and vision.

Verna Gillis

## Special acknowledgement:

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Guillén, Nicolás. *Man-making Words—Selected poems of Nicolás Guillén*. Translated, Annotated, with an Introduction by Robert Márquez and David Arthur McMurray. University of Massachusetts Press, 1972.

Guillén, Nicolás. *¡Patria o Muerte! The Great Zoo and Other Poems*. Edited and translated, by Robert Márquez. Monthly Review Press, New York, 1972.

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PRODUCED BY VERNA GILLIS  
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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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# NICOLÁS GUILLÉN

## poet laureate of revolutionary Cuba

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### Introduction

Along with Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, and García Lorca, Nicolás Guillén, poet laureate of revolutionary Cuba, represents the very best in Hispanic poetry and is at the same time the undisputed leader of an important trend in contemporary Latin American letters. Guillén is also an open stylist whose manner does not simply anticipate a coterie audience.

Since his first widely acclaimed *Motivos de son* (1930), Guillén, a mulatto, has been regarded as the major exponent of Black poetry in the Spanish-speaking world. But his thematic scope is wide, and although primarily known as a poet of folk rhythms, Black and popular themes, he is also recognized for his humor, for his artistic refinement, for the sensitivity of his love ballads, and for the compassionate poignancy of his political and revolutionary verse. He is not, strictly speaking, a poet of Negritude. Unlike Aimé Césaire and the poets of the French and English Caribbean, his concern with Negro culture and his condemnation of white hypocrisy and injustice do not include a direct repudiation of European (in this case Spanish) cultural traditions. Guillén is more properly the poet of a people and his principle concern has been the creation of a poetry with a distinctively Cuban flavor, one which reflects and helps consolidate the Cuban national identity. It is as a Cuban that he (like Frantz Fanon) envisages the wretched of the earth as victims of a common oppression, and it is in this sense that, as the great Argentine critic and thinker Ezequiel Martínez Estrada has observed, "All his work is a battle against oppression, against the privileges and rivalries that separate human beings of whatever condition."

Guillén was born in 1902 in the provincial town of Camagüey. He received his earliest education in the local Catholic and public schools, but until the age of fifteen it was the influence of his father that was decisive. The elder Guillén, a silversmith turned newspaper editor, first introduced him to the lure of printer's ink and to what was to become his second great professional preoccupation, journalism. In the family library, under his father's tutelage, the young Guillén was first exposed to the Spanish classics. His father, a veteran of the Cuban War for Independence, was also an active member of the provincial Partido Liberal leadership and, besides helping with the small chores involved in the publication of the newspaper *Las dos repúblicas* and, later, *La Libertad* Guillén was permitted to sit in during discussions of national political issues. Thus the elder Guillén served as the child's literary and political mentor. The death of his father in 1917, at the hands of conservative government troops, was a severe blow. It meant, as Guillén's biographer Angel Augier points out, "the loss of his friend and teacher, of his firmest spiritual support."<sup>1</sup>

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The death of Guillén's father was followed by a period of economic hardship and bohemian indecisiveness. He assumed responsibility for the family fortunes and, with his brother Francisco, went to work as a typesetter for a local printer. Eventually he spent a year studying law at the University of Havana, but, disappointed with the general atmosphere in the capital, he dropped his studies and returned to Camagüey. It was during this period of uncertainty that Guillén began to show the signs of his poetic gift. His first poems appeared in the early 1920's in *Camagüey gráfico*, a local journal of arts and letters, and bore the stamp of the Modernist influence. Modernism had reached its apogee and, with the death of Rubén Darío in 1916, had begun its decline throughout most of Latin America. In Cuba, however, where that exuberant fascination with the exquisite and with formal perfection had had its own precursors in the work of José Martí and Julián del Casal, the movement lingered and for a time competed with the emerging esthetic of *Los nuevos* (The New Ones). Thus Guillén, like the majority of the writers of his generation, began his poetic career in the shadow of Rubén Darío. But it was "the worst Darío," he later confessed, "the Darío of tintypes and enamels, with swans, fountains, abbots, pages, counts, marchionesses, and all those other knick-knacks." He founded and edited *Lis*, a literary magazine with a Modernist allegiance, and by 1922 had managed to complete his first small book of poems, a collection whose rather unpoetic title, *Cerebro y corazón* (Head and Heart), hinted at the author's tragic ambivalence. It was a derivative work of little poetic distinction which, to the writer's credit, he never published,<sup>2</sup> but which does give us some sense of Guillén's developing technical and rhythmic expertise and of his skeptical and misanthropic outlook at the time. "Lord, Lord, . . . why is humanity so evil?" he pleads in a tone reminiscent of the decadent poets. *Cerebro y corazón* also evinced a tendency to evade reality, an avoidance of the mundane and the popular, and a conception of art that is aristocratic and romantically formalistic.

This collection was followed by a five-year period of silence during which Guillén wrote virtually no poetry but lived immersed in the day-to-day routine of writing articles for newspapers and magazines. His reaction to the literary iconoclasm of the *vanguardistas* - dadaists, surrealists, futurists - appears to have been ambiguous, and although certain of his poems, such as "The Airplane" (written in about 1928), might seem vaguely reminiscent of the futurists, he was to remain on the periphery of their revolt.

With the publication of the *Black Decameron* (1914), Leo Frobenius had laid the foundation for the cult of the primitive; focusing on the folklore and culture of the Negro, it took hold of literature and the arts in Europe after the debacle of the First World War. This new attraction to the world of the Black man was part of the antirationalist and neoromantic response of the intellectuals to the moral collapse of those years. The African and New World Negro, even if not yet accepted as an equal was everywhere admired for the uninhibited genuineness of his reactions to reality, and his art and culture won great popularity as a palliative for the inauthenticity of an exhausted civilization. Jazz was heard in the best salons on the continent. To paraphrase

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Guillén himself: the Negro reigned while boulevards applauded. This new interest in Black culture and the aesthetic possibilities it presented came to fruition in Blaise Cendrars' Black Anthology, in the short stories and commentaries of Paul Morand, in André Gide's Travels in the Congo, and in the work of Pablo Picasso and other artists.

This novel fashion in the arts did not reach Spanish America until about 1926 and was, with very few exceptions, limited in its influence to the poets of the Caribbean. It was the Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos who, in his poem "Danza negra," introduced the new motif and the features of style and content that were to characterize its use before - and for some time after - the appearance of Guillén's work.<sup>3</sup> José Zacarías Tallet and Ramón Guirao, the initiators of the negrista movement in Cuba, did not substantially differ with Palés Matos in their treatment of the Black theme. These poets, all of whom were white, regarded the world of the Negro from the vantage point of the outside observer and their poetry, a highly descriptive poetry, depicted him as a picturesque figure who lives primarily through his senses. He "invariably appeared in an atmosphere of violence, heavy sensuality, frenetic dancing and drumming and voodooesque possession. In the case of the female dancers, the most animal and sensuous aspects of her appearance and movements are emphasized."<sup>4</sup> It was a poetry rich in local color and in erotic and musical effects that depended heavily on rhythmic inventiveness and onomatopoeia, but whose detachment from the scenes it presented indicated that these writer were consciously slumming.

When Guillén's next book, Motivos de son, appeared, it therefore heralded the appearance of a new authenticity and was an immediate and scandalous success. These eight poetic monologues for the first time allowed the Negro to speak for himself and from his own perspective. They were at the same time based on the repetitive rhythms of the son,<sup>5</sup> were therefore deeply rooted in the Cuban folk tradition, and spotlighted the daily world of the Black habanero. In the prologue to the book, Guillén made it clear that unlike those who came before, he intended to

incorporate into Cuban literature - not simply as a musical motif but rather as an element of true poetry - what might be called the poem-son . . . My sones can be put to music, but that does not mean they were written precisely for that purpose, but rather with the aim of presenting, in what is perhaps the most appropriate form, representative scenes created with two brush strokes. . . ordinary people just as they move around us. Just as they speak, just as they think.

Nevertheless, Guillén's first published book of poems was not entirely unrelated to the work of his predecessors in the negrista movement. The total effect of the collection is comic and picturesque. The poet's vision of the world of his creations is a mixture of roguishness and sympathetic amusement. He also focuses on the sensual and frivolous features of that world, and though he faithfully transmits the nuances and subtleties of popular Black speech, he highlights the entertaining characteristics of its linguistic distortions of the normative language. Yet the book contains an implicit, compassionate, critique of life in Havana's Black slums - a social dimension almost entirely lacking in the earlier negrista poetry. The purists considered the book an affront, but their opposition to it - which was not entirely literary - was dismissed and Guillén's reputation as a poet became firmly established.

A year later (1931) he reissued Motivos de son, along with a series of eight new poems, under the title Sóngoro cosongo. The new poems did not abandon the sensual accents of the earlier work (e.g., "Madrigal" and "The New Woman") but indicated something of a shift in emphasis and perspective. Guillén dropped the comic distortions of speech which gave the first poems their distinctive flavor in favor of a more normative poetic language that relied on onomatopoeia and jitanjáforas<sup>6</sup> to suggest the totemic and rhythmic world of Africa in Cuba, in combination with the romance and other meters more typical of the classical Spanish literary tradition. This gave the poet a new freedom, a broader poetic scope, and with it appear the first insinuations of a poetry of social protest. In "Sugarcane," for example, the reader is given a terse glimpse of the anti-imperialist feelings which are to become one of the major preoccupations of Guillén's later poetry.<sup>7</sup> The Negro, moreover, had ceased to be a superficial personality out of popular folklore and had become a character of some depth, part of the national dilemma, an indispensable part of the national heritage. Guillén was moving toward a clearer definition of his role as the poet of a people. He became concerned with the elaboration of a genuinely Cuban poetry, a poetry which would reflect the true history and racial composition of the island. "These are mulatto verses," he explains in the prologue to the book:

They share the same elements that enter into the ethnic composition of Cuba. . . the injection of Africa into this country is so deep, and so many capillary currents cross and interweave in our well irrigated social hydrography, that to decipher the hieroglyphic would be a job for miniaturists. Consequently, I think that among us a creole poetry that neglects the Negro would not be truly creole. . . The Negro - in my view - contributes vital essences to our cocktail. And the two races that emerge on the surface on the island, though apparently distant, are linked subterraneously to each other, like those underwater bridges which secretly join two continents. Therefore the spirit of Cuba is mestizo. And from the spirit through the skin our true color will emerge.

Guillén's merging of African drums with traditional forms in dealing with the Black theme is a reflection, in the realm of technique, of his search for this mestizo spirit.

The publication of West Indies, Ltd. (1934), immediately after the revolution which deposed the dictatorship of Machado (1925-1933), marks a significant transition in the development of Guillén's poetry. Motivos de son exposed the reader to the anecdotal and purely external; Sóngoro cosongo penetrated deeper into the world of the Black but spoke to the whole Cuban nation. With West Indies, Ltd., the poet expands his area of concern to encompass the entire Antillean archipelago. Furthermore, here the elements of social protest come into prominence. The drums and suggestive modes of his previous verse are still evident in "Sensemayá," and there is still, as there will continue to be, the interest in the "mulatto poem." But these strikingly lyrical poems are clear indictments against the abuses and injustices to which the people of the Antilles - and particularly Cubans and Blacks - are collectively subjected under imperialism. The tone is anguished and bitterly elegiac and the mood, though somber, mirrors the frustrations of the incipient revolutionary (see particularly "Riddles" and "Guadeloupe, W.I."). It is the first important step in Guillén's evolution toward Marxism and toward an art of unambiguously militant convictions, although at this stage his protest is a purely visceral indignation, rooted in broadly nationalist and humanitarian ideals with little specific ideological content.



"Sabás," however, does offer some indication of the direction in which his thinking will go and of the militancy which will become characteristic of Guillén's verse after 1934.

In 1936 the Spanish Civil War broke out. A year later Guillén, like artists from all over the world sympathetic to the Republican cause, traveled to Spain as one of the Cuban delegates to the antifascist Second International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture. In that same year, 1937, he joined the Communist Party and, under the impact of the war, wrote España, poema en cuatro angustias y una esperanza (Spain: A Poem in Four Anguishes and a Hope), a poem of epic proportions in which - as in works on the same theme by César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda - the poet laments the Spanish tragedy. He also published his Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas (Songs for Soldiers and Sones for Tourists), poems in which the son, once limited to the realms of the anecdote and the dance, is turned into an instrument for mocking the American tourist in prerevolutionary Cuba and for denouncing the more salient features of American colonialism whose role will qualitatively change only with a change in the social structure. The tone of these poems solemn and accusatory and it is clear that Guillén's allegiance is to the great mass of Cuba's dispossessed - although he also shows a genuine compassion for those victims who, like his soldiers, are unaware of the reality of their own situations. This is as clear in "Why, Soldier, does it seem to you. . ." as his anti-fascism is in "Soldiers in Abyssinia."

Guillén spent the next few years traveling in Europe and on a lecture tour of Latin America, acting at the same time as a correspondent for a number of Cuban publications.<sup>8</sup> His next book of poetry, El son entero (The Entire Son), which did not appear until 1947, brought together the different elements of theme and style which had by now become representative of the poet's work: the son, the "mulatto poem," the atmosphere of pain and accusation. There was also the strict identification with the Negro, wherever he might be, although, as in "Sweat and the Lash," the author had progressed far beyond an interest in the merely picturesque literary motif; "I deny the art that sees in the Negro only colorful motif and not an intensely human theme" he explained during one of his lectures in 1947. He did not want his readers to forget that, particularly in the United States, the Negro was still being denied his most elemental human rights. He wanted his poems to transmit that reality and, to the degree that it was possible, to incite his public to change it. "I believe," he said in that same lecture, "that the true artist, who is always profoundly human, ought to dedicate himself to the definitive work, the one that is created with the blood and the bones of men."

El son entero was followed in 1958 by La paloma de vuelo popular (The Dove of Popular Flight) and Elegías (Elegies), in which the melancholic undertones of his previous books and the already implicit identification of Cuba with the rest of Latin America were crystallized. These two books (usually published together) also provide the reader with the substance of Guillén's hopes for the future and with his vision of the revolution as the only real possibility for Cuba's - and by extension, Latin America's - liberation. These are simple songs

of death and life  
with which to greet a future drenched in blood,  
red as the sheets, as the thighs,  
as the bed  
of a woman who's just given birth.

Implicit in Guillén's concept of a "mulatto poetry" was the universalist premise that, after 1934, had led him to see the Negro as part of the great mass of the disinherited. It was now quite evident that for Guillén - as for Frantz Fanon - the "Negro problem" was not a question of Black men living among whites, but of Black men systematically oppressed by a society that was racist, colonialist, and capitalist, but only accidentally white.

In an effort to combat that society - a society symbolized by the international and domestic policies of the United States - more successfully, Guillén began to employ a number of techniques which, although foreshadowed in his earlier poetry, were used with increasing frequency in his later books. He began, for example, to sprinkle his verse with words and phrases from standard American English with an intent that recalls the hidden meanings behind the title of West Indies, Ltd. Many of these poems are addressed directly to the racial and political situation in the United States as well as other parts of the world (see "Puerto Rican Song"), and, as a result, figures from contemporary politics begin to make their appearance. The specificity with which Guillén indicts individuals like Eisenhower, Nixon, Orville Faubus, and a host of others is contrasted with the use of symbolic and anonymous names - "John Nobody," "John Blade," or simply "John" - to indicate the great mass of ordinary people with whom his sympathies lie. After the success of the Cuban Revolution, the interest in current affairs and Yankee political figures was complemented by the appearance of figures out of Cuba's revolutionary past and present (Antonio Maceo, José Martí, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara), with whom those less palatable individuals were contrasted. In La paloma de vuelo popular, the playful humor of Guillén's earliest works turned to irony and a wry sarcasm. In the Elegías, on the other hand, a sense of loss was added to the sense of outrage. These were in the main laments on the death of friends and victims or - as in "My Last Name" - for an entire history. In addition to the poet's usual stylistic vehicles, a variety of forms and meters were juxtaposed.

With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, Guillén saw the fulfillment of his hopes and prophecies. He embraced the Revolution wholeheartedly, and its unfolding, along with the personalities who led it, immediately became a major theme of his poetry. The emotional tone of much of his verse also underwent a change that reflects the psychological, as well as the political and social, importance of the Revolution. The poet was filled with anew serenity, while the expressiveness of his poems reached a peak of revolutionary fervor. All this is manifest in Tengo (1964), and is nowhere more evident than in the poem that gives that book its title. Its very simplicity - "I Have" - already reflects the new sense of pride in and comradeship with the Cuban people. The new spirit of exuberance is unmistakable as the poem unfolds and Guillén's collective protagonist, at first surprised and bewildered by the sudden turn of events, is moved to take stock of his new relationship to reality. He concludes that he has finally come into possession of his birthright as a man: "I have, let's see:/ I have what was coming to me."

The old themes are still present, but Guillén's former combativeness has become focused on defending and spreading the influence and lessons of the Revolution. The enemy has not yet been completely defeated, and though Cuba is at last free the world as a whole is not and so Guillén still strikes familiar passionate chords of denunciation and exhortation (as in "It is all very well").

Guillén's celebration of the Cuban Revolution is more implicit in his latest collection of poems, El gran zoo (1967). By then the Revolution was an irrevocable fact of history, and from the perspective of that particular reality Guillén's witty little book treats the reader to an ironic interpretation of the contemporary - and particularly the capitalist - world which is now considered part of Cuba's bleak pre-history. Guillén therefore takes his audience on a tour of a symbolic zoo and introduces a mosaic of characters, animal, mineral, and vegetable, which reveal to the reader-tourist a vision of the universe in microcosm. The author's invitation to follow him through this menagerie, is not, however, entirely disinterested: on the one hand, we are invited to tour a zoo and see the "animals" in it; on the other hand, and more significantly, we are given a peculiarly Cuban tour of that zoo. More important than seeing just exactly what is caged is the realization that it is Cuba, and Guillén the guide, who are free and not caged and who interpret and reflect upon what is.

This is a volume which, in structure and style, is unique in Guillén's work. At the same time that the symbolic device of a zoo serves to create an organic totality, the poet moves away from the modes and forms of his previous works in favor of a stylized and elemental language in which everything is reduced to personification and metaphor. The lines are generally very short, the style clipped; rhyme is infrequent and the meter is inconsistent and at times reminiscent of free verse. The intent is to mimic the impersonal tone of plaques and of official notices and announcements, although alternating notes of pride, concern, amusement, and distaste creep into the comments of our host. The total effect of each of the poems is largely dependent on their inter-relationship with each other and, although the great majority could stand alone, there are some which have no particular raison d'être except in terms of the book.

Guillén's major preoccupations are still present, although they are more pointedly synthesized: his uncompromising allegiance to Cuba and his rejection of a world ruled by greed and imperialist aggression are present in "The Caribbean," "The Usures," and "The Eagles"; his concern for the total liberation of the Black man is clear in "Lynch" and "KKK"; implicit in "Tonton-Macoute" is the poet's revolutionary vision of a more humane world.

Guillén's work has, over the years, earned him numerous honors and prizes, including the Stalin Prize in 1953. He is currently President of the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC). He is also the editor-in-chief of La Gaceta de Cuba, an official cultural publication of the Unión and sits on the editorial board of its literary magazine Unión. Since the triumph of the Revolution, he has held diplomatic posts for the Cuban government and traveled throughout Eastern Europe, China, and the Soviet Union.

His most recent poems, some of which have been published in various Cuban journals (and some of which have included in this anthology), have been collected in soon-to-be-published volume entitled La rueda dentada (The Serrated Wheel). It is clear from such poems as "I Declare Myself an Impure Man," "Problems of Underdevelopment," and "Propositions on the Death of Ana," that Guillén intends to continue writing, from a particularly Cuban perspective, a poetry which is explicit, deceptively simple in style, militant in its assumptions, one which reaches out to the Third World and looks forward to liberation, then peace.

- Robert Márquez

Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 1970  
New York, April 1972

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Patria o Muerte! The Great Zoo and Other Poems  
by Nicolás Guillén

The Monthly Review Press

#### Footnotes

1. Augier's two-volume biography, Nicolás Guillén: Notas para un estudio biográfico-crítico (Santa Clara: Universidad de Las Villas, 1964-1965), is the only work of its kind available on Guillén. It is an excellent work that spans the years 1902 to 1948, and anyone interested in the poet will owe it a special debt. I am particularly indebted to Augier for the exhaustiveness of his biographical data.
2. It did not become public until very recently, when it appeared as an appendix to the first volume of Augier's biography.
3. In Cuba, the scholarly research of Fernando Ortiz into the island's Black heritage lent anthropological depth and intellectual legitimacy to the new movement.
4. G. R. Coulthard, Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 94
5. A popular Cuban dance, a cross between the blues and the bugaloo.
6. Jitanjáfora is a word of no particular meaning invented by the artist and used for its suggestiveness. Songoro cosongo, for example, is a jitanjáfora intended to evoke the mysterious world of Africa and the tomtom.
7. The degree to which Guillén (already disturbed by the Negro's plight in a racist society) had begun to respond to Cuba's neocolonial dependence on the United States is evident in a letter he wrote to Arthur Schomburg on October 27, 1932. In addition to showing the poet's deepening anguish, the letter reveals his moral strength. It reads in part: "I confess myself deeply pained by the state my country is in, a slave to foreign gold. We live with the water up to our necks, mediatized by the harshest and most peremptory demands. This leads to a cultural stagnation which makes the development of the spirit very difficult. Perhaps, as in Dante's verse, this is the time to say: 'Lasciate ogni speranza.' And in the background of this sombre, tragic, portrait there is the situation of the Negro, running from one side to the other, without direction, the victim of himself and of his white 'brother' who is worse than Cain, because he is a hypocrite. Still, I don't lose hope. I think that in strong temperaments the difficulties merely redouble the energy, for certain spirits have unknown reserves which surface in every shipwreck. Men are often measured by the magnitude of the conflicts they must confront." (See "Nicolás Guillén Scrapbook," in the New York Public Library, Schomburg Collection.)
8. A selection of Guillén's articles written between 1938 and 1962, Prosa de prisa (Hasty Prose), was published by the Universidad de las Villas in 1962. A second edition was published in 1963 by Editorial Hernández in Buenos Aires.

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