

Black Identity in Cuba
and the United States:

Nicolás Guillén
and
Langston Hughes

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Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes were extraordinary men whose identities were shaped by the particular historical circumstances of their respective countries. They shared important similarities, notably, in respect to the innovations they made in poetry, the importance of their work, and the impact they had on their societies. Guillén's and Hughes' work not only portrayed their societies artistically; but, also reflected the social reality they experienced. For instance, Guillén's career reflected Cuba's self-image as a racially integrated nation, whereas, Hughes' career reflected the United States' (U.S.) stark history of racial segregation and violence. Overall, the careers of both men were limited or expanded by their countries' attitude toward them.

The boundaries that defined the two poets were set by their countries' ideology and treatment of race. Both men were born and raised in the early 1900's, which was a pivotal time in history for race relations in their two countries. Both men were of mixed racial heritage and came from families that had long histories of being involved in political activism. Yet, the differences in their careers were distinctive. Both Guillén and Hughes considered themselves to be Black poets, yet Guillén was seen primarily as a poet who happened to be Black and Hughes as primarily a Black who wrote poetry. This difference was more than just semantic, it was a difference that was encapsulated in the historical conditions of their native countries and defined their literary acceptance at home and abroad.



Nicolás Guillén

The internal structure of the Cuban and U.S. societies and the incorporation or exclusion of African descendants into these societies profoundly affected the kind and degree of recognition each man received. In particular, their countries' ability to perceive them beyond their skin color played a major role in the course their lives took.

Nicolás Guillén was born in Camaguey, Cuba on July 10, 1902. He was the first of six children. His parents were middle class and of mixed African-Hispanic descent. They were considered to be mulatto. Guillén's father was a newspaper editor and politically active in Cuban politics. From

1908 until 1912, his father served as a senator¹. In 1917 the elder Guillén was assassinated during a political uprising in protest of then president Mario García Menocal. His father participated in the rebellion that was sparked by election fraud designed to keep the incumbent president in power. After his father's death, fourteen year old Guillén became the main support for his family.²

Guillén continued his education by attending night classes where he pursued an education in law. He also felt a strong attraction to poetry. He discontinued his law studies and went on to write poetry about the Black experience in Cuba and to highlight many of the social problems associated with race and poverty.³ He joined the

Communist Party in the mid-1930's and, in 1953, was forced into exile because of his satirical attacks on the Batista dictatorship. He returned to Cuba in 1959 after the triumph of Castro's rebel army and was chosen by the new government to help design the cultural policy for revolutionary Cuba. He came to be regarded as Cuba's national poet because the message in his poetry so represented Cuba's revolutionary ideology.

Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, the same year as Guillén. He grew up in Missouri and, like Guillén, his parents were middle class and of mixed African-European heritage. They divorced when he was very

young. He was reared by his maternal grandmother, who recounted to him stories about slavery and the family's long history of fighting for Black equality. As a result, he developed a deep sense of his racial heritage.⁴

Hughes' father was largely absent from his life and did not get along well with his son. The elder Hughes moved to Mexico when the younger Hughes was a boy to avoid the racial segregation and discrimination that was prevalent in America.⁵ In 1921, after returning from a visit with his father, Hughes wrote one of his most well known poems, "A Negro Speaks of Rivers."⁶ Subsequent travels to Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean revealed to him what he considered the global, imperialistic oppression of Black people.

From the 1930's to the 1950's, Hughes' poetry focused on social oppression and class struggle. He never joined the Communist Party but his poetry reflected 'Communist-inspired' views and showed his Marxist sympathies.⁷ Though his writings gave him stature as an international poet abroad, within his own country he was just a Black poet and part of a racially separate literary genre.⁸

The societies in which each poet lived profoundly shaped his poetry. Guillén lived in a society that employed a complex socio-phenotypic definition of race. This was one of the primary factors that contributed to Afro-Cubans identifying themselves nationally first and racially second. The socio-phenotypic definition of race is grounded in a tripartite system of racial categorization based on skin color (degree of melanin), phenotype (physical appearance), and class position. Due to this complex system of racial designation, Afro-Cubans were incorporated more broadly into Cuban society than their counterparts in U.S. society. Those that were able to reach the highest levels in Cuban

society did so, in general, because they had a socially acceptable degree of 'white' appearance and the proper financial credentials. It is important to realize that these Afro-Cubans were socially designated as white and their achievements were seen as being due to their white ancestry. Those that were too dark to be considered 'white' could still reach the upper strata of the society if they had sufficient financial and social status.

In addition to the above, three major events in Cuban history solidified the viewpoint that allowed Afro-Cubans to identify themselves as Cuban first and Black second. The first event was the War of Independence. It could not have been won without the contributions of Afro-Cubans. In one motion, Cuba not only gained independence from Spain but also emancipated the slaves. This fight for freedom of self and nation created within Afro-Cubans a strong sense of nationalism. In essence, Afro-Cubans became human and citizens in one move. Second, in 1912, Afro-Cubans who formed an independent political party based on color were massacred. The majority of the estimated 3,000-4000 Afro-Cubans killed decimated the strong Afro-Cuban middle class. As a result, this violent event forcefully encouraged Afro-Cubans to downplay their Africanness. Third, half a century later, the Cuban Revolution re-solidified nationalism amongst Afro-Cubans. The revolution focused on incorporating and gaining support from the Black population. Thus, the Cuban socio-phenotypic definition of race, the sense of personhood and citizenship garnered through the War of Independence and the political danger (i.e. death) associated with the Massacre of 1912 encouraged the Afro-Cuban population to stress their Cubaness as opposed to being identified by 'race.'



Langston Hughes

Hughes was born in a country that had a racial history quite different from that of Cuba. Despite its melting pot image, the U.S. has always been racially divided and hostile, especially towards those of African descent. This hostility is implicit in the U.S.

rigid definition of race. During Hughes' time, race was static and defined by one characteristic: African ancestry. As long as a person had one drop of African blood, she was considered to be Black regardless of phenotype or class. This definition of race effectively barred people with African ancestry from integrating into the different levels of society regardless of how 'white' they appeared.⁹

The United States employed official separation of Blacks from Whites through legal means and excluded them from the political process. Also, integration was actively discouraged by landlords and factory owners who found it more advantageous to have labor organized along racial lines. This was the 'divide and conquer' technique of keeping laborers from effective organization.

When the U.S. was fighting in the Independence War against the British, many Afro-American slaves fought on the British side because they were promised freedom if the British won.¹⁰ The Afro-American slaves did not achieve the same sense of

nationalism and freedom as Afro-Cubans who fought in the same war. In addition, the Civil War, which freed enslaved Afro-Americans in the U.S. was seen as causing a big divide within the country.

Racial tension in the U.S. spread from the South to the North and was further exacerbated by the migration of Blacks during World War I. Blacks were seen as cheap labor and many Whites feared for their jobs. Also, Blacks were used as ‘scabs’ to prevent effective strikes by workers. Afro-Americans were never made to feel apart of the nation and, therefore, felt what Dubois described as ‘twoness’ having an identity that was always Black first and American second.

Both Guillén and Hughes portrayed African descendants differently from how they were portrayed by Whites (and by some other Blacks) as “primitives.” Their poems followed similar veins of development and each man influenced and was influenced by the other. They both participated in the Negritude movement and each made a major contribution to the use of music as a literary device. In fact, it was Hughes’ visit to Cuba that inspired some of Guillén’s early race consciousness works.

Guillén incorporated the ‘Son’¹¹ and Hughes the ‘Blues’ into his poems. Both of these musical forms were Afro-American innovations. The use of these rhythmic musical styles within the literary world helped to bring the musical forms to full cultural appreciation within their societies. Within this poetic genre both men used ‘black’ language and images and both were criticized by other Blacks for using ‘black’ language within their poems.

Further, both men explored the critical issues of mixed heritage (both physical and cultural) within their poems. Two of Guillén’s poems, “El Apellido” (The Family Name) and “Balada de los dos Abuelos” (Ballad of the two Grandfathers), stand out in highlighting the similarities. The first poem “El Apellido” shows the severed ties

with Africa with the loss of the family name and native tongue.

“The Family Name” (excerpt)

... Don’t I have then
 A Mandinga, Congo or dahomeyan grand-
 father?
 What’s his name? Oh, yes, tell me?
 Andrés? Francisco? Amable?
 How do you say Andrés in Congo?
 Am I Yelofe?
 Nicolás Yelofe, perhaps?
 Or Nicolás Bankongo?
 Maybe Guillén Banguila?
 Or Kumbá?
 Perhaps Guillén Kumbá?
 Or Kongué?
 Could it be Guillén Kongué?
 Oh, who knows!
 What an enigma between the waters!

Guillén also shows the mixed heritage of Afro-Cubans by making the first name Spanish and the last name African. “Balada de los dos Abuelos” also stresses the mixed heritage of Afro-Cubans. In it, Guillén shows how the White grandfather tricked the Black grandfather, but the poem also implies that they are both part of the family.

Hughes’ works also highlights the mixed nature of Afro-Americans. A good example of this is “Cross.”

Cross

My old man’s a white man
 And my old mother’s black.
 If I ever cursed my white old man
 I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
 And wished she were in hell,

I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?

Here Hughes shows African-American ambiguity about being of mixed heritage and emphasizes the division in treatment between White and Black parents. His poems also emphasize the humanity of Afro-Americans.

In their later works, Guillén and Hughes wrote poetry that addressed many different issues such as political oppression, unemployment, imperialism, and the treatment of African descendants. This is the point where the two men diverged and took different career paths.

Guillén identified himself as Afro-Cuban but he defined his struggles as broader than just a race issue. The themes in his poems incorporated all aspects of his society and went beyond a discussion of Afro-Cuban rights to a discussion of human rights. "The divided self of the Afro-Cuban, the irresponsibility of national leaders, militarism, and American domination of Latin America were all seen by Guillén as fitting themes for poetry."¹² As a strong advocate of Marxism, Guillén saw race in the context of Marxist ideology and race oppression as analogous to class oppression.

Hughes' whole world was defined by race. The themes in his poems were multi-variant but they invariably revolved around Afro-Americans. He clearly states this in the following piece he wrote for "The Nation".

"One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet-not a Negro poet, ' meaning, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning, sub-consciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that 'I would like to be white.' And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. . . ."¹³

Even when he went abroad, Hughes focused on the people of color and compared them to Afro-Americans. He did this because race issues were what his audiences wanted to read about and, because it was a tactic of inclusion in a society that took measures to exclude and silence Blacks from political and social participation.

When both men discussed the positions of soldiers in society we notice a difference in their focus. In Guillén's "Yanqui con soldado" (Yankee with a Soldier), "Elegia a un soldado vivo" (Elegy to a Living Soldier), and "Soldado así no he de ser" (I won't be that kind of Soldier) the focus is on the soldier's relation to the people he is fighting against.¹⁴ Hughes, on the other hand, focuses on the color of the soldier and how his color relates to the 'unjustness' of his cause. This is emphasized in his poem "The Weary" in which he underscores the racial ties between Afro-Americans and the Moors.¹⁵

Guillén was able to step outside of his race and discuss broader social issues because he was from Cuba, which allowed him to situate himself beyond the oppression imposed on him because of his color. Afro-Cubans were included and acknowledged as part of Cuban consciousness. After the triumph of Castro in 1960, Guillén was embraced as a representative of national Cuban issues.

Hughes was internationally known for his poems about social oppression. Yet,

these same poems did not receive much recognition in the U.S., his homeland. They were published only in magazines, if at all.¹⁶ Thus, when he stepped outside of his race and wrote on broader topics, he was ignored because it threatened the fabric of American society. He focused on race because he was from the U.S. and, as an Afro-American, was unable to climb the walls of racism and oppression that his country imposed upon him. He could not represent his nation because it did not recognize and include him as a part of that nation. Thus, the chains of his color on American soil grounded him in a way that it did not ground Guillén.

In conclusion, we realize that several factors affected the careers of these two men. First, the structure of race relations. Second, the historical position of Blacks. Third, the ideological stance their countries took, either integration which tried to eradicate racial divisions in the society or separation which created and maintained divisions in the society. The interplay of these factors structured the content of their discourse and ultimately played a role in Guillén and Hughes' ability to represent and be accepted as representing the ideology of their nations.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. It is interesting to note that he served as a senator until the 1912 race massacre in which thousands of Afro-Cubans were killed.
2. See Cobb, Martha. (1979). *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana*. Three Continents Press, p. 10
3. See Ellis, Keith. (1983). *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén: Poetry and Ideology*. University of Toronto Press, pp. 51-52
4. See Berry, Faith. (1983). *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*. Lawrence Hill and Co, p. 7
5. See Cobb, Martha. (1979). *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana*. Three Continents Press, p. 57
6. See Mullen, Edward J. (1977). *Langston Hughes: In the Hispanic World and Haiti*. Archon Books, p. 17
7. See Cobb, Martha. (1979). *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana*. Three Continents Press, pp. 73-77
8. See Mullen, Edward J. (1977). *Langston Hughes: In the Hispanic World and Haiti*. Archon Books, p.11
9. Those who did 'pass' into White society did so because their racial background was unknown.
10. Many Blacks also fought on the American side also.
11. Examples of his works that includes the Son are 'Sóngoro Consongo,' 'Bembón,' and 'Son número 6.'
12. Williams, Lorna V. (1982). *Self and Society in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén*. The John Hopkins University Press, p. 139
13. Berry, Faith. (1983). *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*. Lawrence Hill and Co, p. 71
14. Ellis, Keith. (1983). *Cuba's Nicolas Guillén: Poetry and Ideology*. University of Toronto Press, pp. 101-102
15. Mullen, Edward J. (1977). *Langston Hughes: In the Hispanic World and Haiti*. Archon Books, p. 36
16. See Mullen, Edward J. (1977). *Langston Hughes: In the Hispanic World and Haiti*. Archon Books, 1977 and Martha Cobb. *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana*. Three Continents Press.