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Mark J. Mascia

Sacred Heart University, masciam@sacredheart.edu

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Recommended Citation

Mascia, M. J. (2003). The living world, politics and nation: Nature and discourse in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén. *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association*, 99(1), 67-103.
doi: 10.1179/aulla.2003.006

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THE LIVING WORLD, POLITICS AND NATION: NATURE AND DISCOURSE IN THE POETRY OF NICOLÁS GUILLÉN

MARK J. MASCIA
Sacred Heart University

The work of the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén (1902-89) has been widely studied throughout both the Spanish- and English-speaking worlds. Most often, Guillén's poetic corpus is examined from two particular perspectives: its political aspect and its African elements. In the first case, Guillén is valued for his political ideology of communism, and is placed within the context of elaborating the social condition of the Cuban people and of the masses of Latin America as a whole. In the second, Guillén is examined for his contributions to Afrocentric literary movements and for his inclusion of different African traits in his poetry, most notably lyrical rhythms, musicality, vocabulary and folklore.

In all of the criticism on his poetry, however, there is no substantial contribution on Guillén's appropriation of a very particular but recurring theme: the use of and variations upon nature. Throughout Guillén's approaches to nature, one common characteristic remains stable and central: nature, regardless of the particular context in which it is treated and regardless of the particular geographical frame of reference in question, is always seen as a vital, animate entity, whose life-giving force envelops humankind. Nature and humanity are deeply intertwined, and often symbiotically so, in Guillén's work.

Indeed, nature serves numerous purposes in Guillén's poetry, and his understanding and poetic portrayal of it evolve throughout his career. First, nature itself is presented as a bodily character, as appreciable as any sentient being worthy of consideration in literature. Secondly, nature is used as an instrument in constructing

ideas about nationhood and culture. People's relationship to nature is an intimate and necessary one for their survival and self-understanding. Additionally, nature is used to advance certain political or cultural points of view, primarily the leftist and Afrocentric visions mentioned above. Finally, Guillén's use of nature often creates a certain mythos regarding both personal and collective identity, a poetic mythology which helps define the poet himself, Cuba, Latin America, and people generally all in turn. In sum, what Guillén does is to humanise the physical environment and conjoin its living essence with that of humankind.

By analysing key examples of Guillén's use of nature throughout several decades of poetic discourse, this essay will argue that they all are fundamentally rooted in a configuration of nature as a living being and in an understanding of humanity's place as part of nature. For Guillén, nature is not simply something that he merely appreciates as a theme; rather, it is a vital element central to his view of the world and to his development as a writer. The collections examined here are *West Indies, Ltd.*, *El son entero*, and *La paloma de vuelo popular*. They are all pivotal in Guillén's career in that they were composed after his interest in African and political themes had begun, but before the triumph of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution of 1959.¹

West Indies, Ltd.

West Indies, Ltd. Was published in 1934.² With this collection, Guillén definitively begins to introduce two features in his work that will become central to his entire poetic corpus: political activity and African elements. At the same time, two principal examples of the treatment of animate nature stand out, though in these cases such treatment is less overtly concerned with politics as it is with cultural identity. One such example is "Balada del güije."³ In this instance, Guillén includes elements of African folklore in a description of nature that includes an inimical relationship between spirits of the river and people. Using the technique of verse repetition, or *estribillo*, common in much of his poetry and an example of African rhythmic influence, the poem opens: "¡Ñeque, que se vaya el ñeque! / Güije, que se vaya el güije!" This couplet is repeated several times throughout the poem. The *ñeque* is defined in terms of animistic and magical beliefs: "El individuo que lleva en sí la desgracia y la transmite a otro."⁴ Similarly, the *güije* is a spirit which lives in the rivers and which takes on the form of a small black boy.⁵ Shortly after this couplet, a long strophe follows which immediately provides a sense of fear and doom, as the river is

described as the cemetery of many formerly living beings:

Las turbias aguas del río
son hondas y tienen muertos;
carapachos de tortuga,
cabezas de niños negros.

Death and life form the two principal elements in the poem, though they are not always opposed. Despite the desire of people to escape the *güijé's* grasp, death becomes the desired object of the living river, in that its forces demand death from the land's inhabitants. All living things are brought together under the river through death; death is a transition from one stage of life to the next, although forcibly in the case of the *güijés*.

The river is described according to a metaphorical system that encodes it with animate and corporeal features:

De noche saca sus brazos
el río, y rasga el silencio
con sus uñas, que son uñas
de cocodrilo frenético.

Other elements of nature are also accorded animate descriptions, as sound effects complement this view of nature:

Bajo el grito de los astros,
bajo una luna de incendio,
ladra el río entre las piedras
y con invisibles dedos,
sacude el arco del puente
y estrangula a los viajeros.

After repeating the couplet mentioned earlier, fearful images of the water spirits are evoked, and the process of mythification is made more obvious:

Enanos de ombligo enorme
pueblan las aguas inquietas;

.
¡Ah, que se comen mi niño,
de carnes puras y negras,
y que le beben la sangre,
y que le chupan las venas[!]

A reference to a protective charm, presumably of African origin as well, is subsequently made:

¡Huye, que el coco te mata,
huye antes que el coco venga!
Mi chiquitín, chiquitón,
que tu collar te proteja...

The process of invocation is detailed by Angel Augier, who also refers to the repeated couplet as "una especie de exorcismo": "Según la leyenda, seguramente de procedencia africana, los ríos están poblados de duendecillos llamados güijes, que devoran a los niños."⁶

The poem occasions a transition when Guillén includes the African god Changó. Changó allows the *güije* to be victorious against the small child: "Salió del agua una mano / para arrastrarlo ... Era un güije." The poetic language in the remaining lines of the strophe takes on a markedly violent tone, as the evil spirit does away with its human victim:

Le abrió en dos tapas el cráneo,
le apagó los grandes ojos,
le arrancó los dientes blancos,
e hizo un nudo con las piernas
y otro nudo con los brazos.

The violence of the word here serves to illustrate the mythological ferocity that occurs in nature when various forces compete for the same space. Augier follows up his analysis by observing that the

madre negra intenta alejarlo [el güije] con su grito y lo asocia al güije e invoca la protección de Changó—santo de la teogonía africana que en la devoción popular se identifica con la católica Santa Bárbara—, y que considera presente en el collar que debe salvaguardar del <<coco>> al hijo, preservándolo así de la amenaza de las adversas fuerzas ocultas. (268-69)

Violence in the poem takes on the characteristics of an epic in miniature, a struggle between good and evil: the supernatural *güije* versus humanity, and death versus life. Yet all are intertwined and occupy the same geographical and poetic space. This type of reality can be understood along the lines of "magic realism," a worldview that blends palpable objectivism with human imagination. Violent though this "reality" may be, it is what the Afro-Cuban world might

imagine, based on its environmental and cultural contexts. Miguel Angel Asturias, the Guatemalan Nobel, has examined this "magical reality" as such:

Las alucinaciones, las impresiones que el hombre obtiene de su medio tienden a transformarse en realidades, sobre todo allí donde existe una determinada base religiosa y de culto, como en el caso de los indios. No se trata de una realidad palpable, pero sí de una realidad que surge de una determinada imaginación mágica.⁷

In addition to magic realism in general, the specific African element is key to understanding the treatment of nature in this poem. Long considered merely the realm of quaint folklore or "pagan" beliefs worthy of condemnation from the dominant culture, African folklore is here treated with respect and with the same sort of candour to which western readers have been accustomed for centuries regarding poetry of the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁸ A certain sense of tribal affiliation pervades this poem, as it does many others in this stage of Guillén's poetic development. In sum, the poem "Balada del güije" is a revalorisation of deep roots in the transplanted African past, using animate nature as a backdrop. As Augier aptly states,

aquí estamos en presencia de una especie de ritual de reminiscencias totémicas, donde el canto acompañado de ceremonias convencionales parece tener un poder mágico sobre un animal ... que simboliza un enemigo o una potencia maligna para el que quiere destruirla, tradición originada posiblemente en rivalidades tribales africanas. (270)

Guillenean poetic discourse includes the overtly tribal and mythological in its treatment of nature.⁹ Though in many of Guillén's poems, humankind and nature share a beneficial and intimate relationship, in this one poem the two are more generally opposed. The use of a natural element often seen in literature (the river, in this instance) here blurs the boundaries between what is often considered "man-made" or "artificial" (the daily lives of people and their dwellings) and what is "natural"; people and nature cannot be seen as unrelated entities as they often are. The specifically negative perspective used here in portraying nature, however, will change in time.

The other example of an animate view of nature from the same collection is "Palabras en el trópico."¹⁰ The main character of this

poem is the "trópico" itself, treated as a living personage and as the poet's interlocutor. It is an active entity within the cosmos, acting upon its various inhabitants:

Tú secas en la piel de los árboles
la angustia del lagarto.
Tú engrasas las ruedas de los vientos
para asustar a las palmeras.
Tú atravíasas
con una gran flecha roja
el corazón de las selvas
y la carne de los ríos.

The reader perceives the pulse of the tropics' life. Various bodily metaphors are used: the "piel de los árboles," the "corazón de las selvas," and the "carne de los ríos." By characterizing topography as body, nature is immediately ascribed an animate state:

The following strophes develop the theme of the tropics as a living body and continue the metaphoric system established previously. The land is seen in the diversity of its features and of its denizens throughout the poem. The narrator treats the tropics respectfully, with its name capitalised: "Trópico / con tu cesta de mangos, / tus cañas limosneras / y tus caimitos." The tropics also give a stable livelihood to its people:

Te veo las manos rudas
partir bárbaramente las semillas
y halar de ellas el árbol opulento,
árbol recién nacido, pero apto
para echar a correr por entre los bosques clamorosos.

Bodily description is highlighted through a supranational association of the entire region with its inhabitants in following verses: "retozando en las aguas con mis Antillas desnudas, / yo te saludo, Trópico." Guillén's supranational focus is not only in the "Antillas desnudas" mentioned above but also in "estas islas escandalosas tuyas" and in the following parenthetical strophe: "(Dice Jamaica / que ella está contenta de ser negra, / y Cuba ya sabe que es mulata!)" Guillén's focus thus takes on a Pan-Caribbean perspective.¹¹ Humankind, in this case, is dependent on nature, as seen in the intimacy of the relationship between the Caribbean peoples and the tropics.

A transition in the poem's movement occurs when the poet begins to describe his own physiognomy and its origins in that of

the land. Power and the senses are afforded the poetic voice as it proclaims:

Puños los que me das
para rajar los cocos tal un pequeño dios colérico;
ojos los que me das
para alumbrar la sombra de mis tigres;
oído el que me das
para escuchar sobre la tierra las pezuñas lejanas.

Here one begins to find an autochthonous view of man: as the forest takes on images of human form, man's true origins and form are seen as those of the tropics. The characterisation of the relationship between people and the physical world as one of symbolic and genetic dependency is highlighted. One might even speculate as to whether Guillén provides an allusion to William Blake's "The Tiger," as seen in the "ojos" and "tigres" in this strophe. The autochthonous view of man is explicitly elaborated within the final strophe:

Te debo el cuerpo oscuro,
las piernas ágiles y la cabeza crespa,
mi amor hacia las hembras elementales,
y esta sangre imborrable.

Perhaps Guillén provides a more evident intertext with the Judeo-Christian notion of people being made in God's image: instead of God's it is nature's image which gives people their form. In addition, sexuality (in a male heterosexual fashion) is referred to again by the poet's love for "las hembras elementales," a reference that also leads to the essentialist though positively-intended view of women being closely related to the earth.¹² Ian Smart defends Guillén's treatment of women, and black women in particular, by suggesting that "what distinguishes Guillén's treatment of the black woman is the overall, consistent, and real black consciousness from which it springs."¹³

Before concluding the analysis of this poem, it should be noted that not all scholars have agreed with the constructed linkage between women and nature, or with racialised characterisations thereof. For example, Sofia Kearns challenges some of these notions in her definition of ecofeminism:

El ecofeminismo cree firmemente que la destrucción ecológica es sintomática de la crisis de valores particulares. Dichos

valores se basan en dicotomías jerárquicas tales como hombre-mujer, cultura-naturaleza, humanos-no humanos, blancos-gente de color, etc., siendo el primer elemento de cada pareja el normativo y el segundo el marginal y explotable. Estas jerarquías rígidas se basan en la diferenciación y estereotipación sexual y crean distorsiones socio-culturales tales como considerar a la mujer parte de la naturaleza y no de la cultura, clasificar a la naturaleza, a la mujer y a grupos minoritarios en categorías inferiores, marginales y explotables; y negar posibilidades de diversidad, integración y armonía de elementos.¹⁴

Indeed, Guillén's poetry was written before the emergence of ecofeminism, but that does not negate the fact that Guillén unwittingly (or perhaps even consciously) plays into established gender and racial typecasting in his work, regardless of his aesthetic and personal intentions.

The poem concludes with a litany of natural elements for which the poet feels obliged to give thanks, using a series of phrases starting with "te debo." In shortened form, the voice reads aloud to his topographical interlocutor:

Te debo los días altos ...

 te debo los labios húmedos,
 la cola del jaguar y la saliva de las culebras;
 te debo el charco donde beben las fieras sedientas;
 te debo, Trópico,
 este entusiasmo niño.

This "entusiasmo niño" runs over the earth, which in turn is once again described as a body: "la pista / de tu profundo cinturón lleno de rosas amarillas, / riendo sobre las montañas y las nubes." Finally, the sea, air and land are all brought together, as these three elements are closed to form the generalised space of the tropics: "mientras un cielo marítimo / se destroza en interminables olas de estrellas a mis pies." The unusual associations of "cielo marítimo" and "olas de estrellas" allows for a cosmic *mestizaje* that complements the racial and cultural *mestizaje* common to Cuban culture and Guillenean poetics.¹⁵ The symbiotic relationship between man and nature becomes evident, in part because of the common morphology of these two interrelated beings. Jorge María Ruscalleda Bercedóniz's assessment of Guillén's treatment of people and nature is helpful in understanding this work:

Uno de los rasgos más sobresalientes de la poesía de Nicolás Guillén es la fuerza vital que alienta en cada estrofa... Hay una especie de transmutación en que la naturaleza se personifica y el negro se animaliza. Se establece un círculo continuo, evolutivo o regresivo, en que todos los seres y las cosas proyectan su vitalidad de unos a otros. El hombre es la piedra angular de la naturaleza y todo aspira a su grandeza.¹⁶

Others, however, have suggested a somewhat different approach to the human-nature relationship, opting instead to support the idea that people are not the pinnacle of nature's achievements but rather a part of nature generally. For example, Henry Harrington and John Tallmadge, in their description of ecocriticism and its aims, have stated, "Ecocentric philosophers have argued that the separation of self and culture from nature can be held responsible for much of our current environmental crisis."¹⁷ Ruscalleda Bercedóniz' analysis does indeed examine the relationship between people and the natural world, but to understand Guillén's work more fully, one must take into account the interdependence of humankind and nature, as opposed to a description of this relationship as one of domination (by people) and servitude (of nature). In sum, Guillén's poetry usually tends to stay away from implying the latter portrayal of the humanity/nature relationship, preferring instead the former.

El son entero

The collection entitled *El son entero*, published in 1947, also contains many poems dedicated to nature and its animate state, but which contain less political content than similar ones published later. One of these compositions is the short "Palma sola" (*Summa poética* 149-50). On this occasion it is the simple yet noble palm tree that forms the poetic object. In three brief strophes the palm tree occupies different spaces and shifts from a fixed state to a free, mobile one. The first strophe relates the birth and growth of the palm tree as though it were a living person, whose growth is parallel to the normally unobservant eye of the narrator:

La palma que está en el patio,
nació sola;
creció sin que yo la viera,
 creció sola;
 bajo la luna y el sol,
 vive sola.

The repetition of the adjective "sola" is significant in that the

identity of the palm tree is singular and individual, and it is ascribed personality and self-worth. The two preterite verbs of "nacer" and "crecer" refer to the tree's infancy and youth, while the present tense "vivir" denotes its current, simple action of living. Its location is described with respect to three key places: "en el patio" and "bajo la luna y el sol." Its relationship to the rest of nature becomes apparent through the inclusion of the "luna" and "sol," while its inclusion in the human realm is of equal relevance with its surroundings in the "patio." As an artificially created space, the patio becomes a microcosm of the larger universe from which the palm tree sprung, and man is not divorced from but rather linked to nature via the palm tree. Though people can voluntarily enclose a palm tree in an artificial, created residence, it would be impossible to do so if the wider natural world had not previously existed and given life to the palm tree. In this manner, nature does not depend on people so much as people depend on it.

The body of the palm tree is mentioned in the subsequent strophe, which repositions it in the setting of the patio and openly describes it as a fixed entity:

Con su largo cuerpo fijo,
palma sola,
sola en el patio sellado,
siempre sola.

The continuous repetition of the qualifier "sola" pervades this strophe as well as the previous and the following ones, indicating the uniqueness of the unnamed palm tree. It takes on further human attributes as it is likened to a sentinel of the afternoon, an allusion to its capacity to provide shade:

guardián del atardecer,
sueña sola.
La palma sola soñando,
palma sola.

The reference to the tree's capacity to dream continues the process of personification and leads the reader to a serene affective state.

In the final strophe, which continues the sentence begun in the previous one, the characterisation of the palm tree's status is shifted from fixedness to mobility. A capacity to dream and its relation to the wind lift it up from its earthly roots:

que va libre por el viento,
 libre y sola,
 suelta de raíz y tierra,
 suelta y sola,
 cazadora de las nubes,
 palma sola,
 palma sola,
 palma.

This time it is the adjective "libre," opposed to "fijo" in the preceding stanza, which provides the main focus for understanding the palm tree. Whereas before it was fixed in the earth, now the tree can be borne aloft by the winds, while preserving its state of being "sola" and unique. In addition, it is personified as a hunter, though one of a different sort, a "cazadora de las nubes." It is also relevant to note that the idea of a palm tree "libre" and "suelta de raíz y tierra" is a logical paradox, hence an example of the inclusion of this traditional poetic technique within Guillenean aesthetics. Moving from a stationary to a free-moving state, and from artificially constructed spaces to the unlimited, natural space of the cosmos, the solitary poetic object of the "palma" provides another tranquil example of nature's powers. Perhaps Guillén means to portray the palm tree as a metaphor for human "captivity" on earth and, somewhat paradoxically, its freedom to live as well.

In the same collection, "La tarde pidiendo amor" (*Obra poética* 293) focuses attention on a humorous subject-object relationship between the poetic voice and his interlocutor, the afternoon. This dialectic is structured in three strophes and a final word, and is based upon the afternoon's constant, imploring attempt to seduce the poetic subject. At the same time, the poetic subject responds negatively with equal insistence. The very title refers to nature as an animate being in need of emotional and bodily fulfilment. The poem opens using the repetition of certain key phrases:

La tarde pidiendo amor.
 Aire frío, cielo gris.
 Muerto sol.
 La tarde pidiendo amor.

This strophe serves as an introduction to the dialectic which defines the poem, and forms the first part of a tripartite structure: the foundation of the problematic that is to follow; the case itself and the poetic subject's temptation by the afternoon; and finally, the rejection of the afternoon by the subject despite its constant

entreaties. In this brief introduction, the physical atmosphere of the poem is set, and the reader is immediately transported into the realm of the poetic voice during the afternoon, with the reference to the "aire frío, cielo gris" and the "muerto sol."

The second strophe defines the object, the afternoon, as a sensual object of enticement for the narrator. In this poetic definition, Guillén establishes a certain serene carnality in describing the afternoon:

Pienso en sus ojos cerrados,
la tarde pidiendo amor,
y en sus rodillas sin sangre,
la tarde pidiendo amor,
y en sus manos de uñas verdes,
y en su frente sin color,
y en su garganta sellada ...

The passage is followed by a repetition of the poem's title. The various anatomical parts of the afternoon link the two representational systems of a naked woman and of the gray sky and green earth. Such linkage is seen in the associations of "rodillas sin sangre," "uñas verdes," and "frente sin color." This type of linkage further elaborates the trend in personification of nature noted previously by Rusalleda Bercedóniz and allows for the object to be treated in a sexual manner and at least intends to be wholesome, though this female/nature linkage might still be seen as objectifying and condescending. The tendency to describe nature as woman also evokes the traditional topos of Mother Nature, common in both western and non-western cultures.

However, this segment of the poem and its associations of women and nature are still an example of patriarchal discourse. The tendency to feminise nature has been called into question by numerous scholars both within and outside the Latin American literary milieu. The analysis of Rachel Stein, for instance, focuses primarily on the North American literary context, but is equally significant here:

The conflation of women and nature within this paradigm often boded poorly for actual American women who, like nature, were generally subordinated to male mastery and denied the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Construed as closer to nature than men, more immersed in the bodily cycles of reproduction and mothering, women were, for the most part, believed to be lacking in the higher mental and

spiritual powers through which men asserted themselves over the natural world and raised themselves beyond mere physical existence. Believed to be deficient in such characteristics as rationality, political and social leadership, artistic genius, and spiritual authority, women were second-class citizens who were precluded from owning property, attaining higher education, participating actively in public life, or voting.¹⁸

Though the association of women with nature is quite common in the cultural production of many places and time periods, it still remains essentialist at its core and does not represent an immutable, unquestionable reality. It also feeds into actual power structures within different societies. Stein's portrayal of how this association led to legal and socioeconomic problems for women should be taken into account when examining literary discourse in North America and elsewhere.

Returning to the poem, the final strophe elaborates the exchange between the narrator and the personified afternoon, and enunciates the subject's final decision to rebuff the afternoon's efforts at seduction, using a series of negatives:

No.
 No, que me sigue los pasos,
 no;
 que me habló, que me saluda,
 no;
 que miro pasar su entierro,
 no;
 que me sonríe, tendida,
 tendida, suave y tendida,
 sobre la tierra, tendida,
 muerta de una vez, tendida ...

The repeated word "no" acts as a self-contained articulation from the poet's perspective, in opposition to the afternoon's advances. The afternoon follows him with words and actions, as the conjugated forms of "seguir," "hablar," and "saludar" indicate. In the second half of the strophe, the gradual shift towards the poet's final victory is introduced, as he sees the "entierro" of the afternoon pass by. This "entierro" is a metaphor for dusk; the living entity of the afternoon, though dying, is still alive and animate even when metaphorically associated with death, since death presupposes life. Such death is still accompanied by the smile of the afternoon and by its perpetual supine state, as seen through

the constant repetition of "tendida."

The final word of the poem, now a self-contained strophe as well, is predictably the word "No." The subject has casually won the ongoing dialectic between him and this tempting but ephemeral opposite. Through this treatment of nature, the reader observes a ludic sense of the relationship between man and nature, elaborated here through harmless sexual advances and denials. The seductive aura of nature gives the afternoon life (as well as death, as dusk approaches) and allows it to be personified just as the human subject. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's observation regarding the tendency of Guillén's poetry to include an oral element is useful in this context:

Se ha dicho que la poesía más significativa de Guillén es hablada, y que esa personificación del autor en cada locutor que dice en vez de narrar, describir o recitar, dan a su obra un tenor y calor muy particulares, acentuándose la pureza de la emoción por ser, casi siempre, la participación al lector—que escucha—de una situación, una circunstancia o un trance que despiertan, cualquier sea la calidad, su simpatía inmediata, sus reflejos incondicionados, humanos.¹⁹

It should be noted that Guillén's frequent treatment of nature in anthropomorphic terms does not intend to show a degree of "superiority" of humankind over nature. Rather, it is because of the poet's obvious familiarity with the human self that he chooses to ascribe nature common human attributes. It may seem from this poem that Guillén separates humankind from nature, though in reality such an apparent "separation" is only meant to highlight the ongoing connection and interdependence between the two. People are still a part of nature, even in a ludic poem that shows an unnamed person resisting nature's sexual advances. People and nature are interrelated and not locked in a hierarchical, master-servant relationship. Aimin Cheng's study of the American writer Henry David Thoreau in terms of Chinese philosophy is useful in explaining this connection. Though Guillén writes from a clearly different cultural standpoint, his poetry can be better understood when viewed along with Cheng's analysis:

It is well known that the Western understanding of humanity's relationship with nature is quite different from that of the Chinese. In the West, it is generally held that nature, like humanity, was created by God and should be conquered and used by humanity, whereas in China, humanity is believed to

come from nature and will eventually return to it—therefore, humanity is regarded as part of nature. In Western natural philosophy, the relationship between humanity and nature exists often as the confronting “I-Thou” relationship, while in Chinese philosophy it presents a harmonious “part-whole” relationship.²⁰

Though Guillén apparently had never borrowed from Chinese philosophy consciously, he does allow some of the same basic elements of the “part-whole” relationship in his views on nature and humanity.

La paloma de vuelo popular

Guillén's treatment of animate nature begins to change with the publication of one of his most extensive collections, *La paloma de vuelo popular*, compiled between 1953 and 1958. By this stage in the development of Guillén's poetic corpus, politics is more frequently combined with the aesthetics of animate nature. Understanding this new type of poetic discourse might best be achieved by first examining the introductory poem, “Arte poética” (*Summa poética* 159-60). In seven quatrains, the poet outlines his own poetic development through allusions to his own life stages and by using nature-inspired metaphors. In this self-reflective composition, Guillén begins with a reference to an earlier stage, undoubtedly influenced by *modernismo* and the poetry of Rubén Darío.²¹ Serene and reflective of both nature itself and his vision of it, he writes:

Conozco la azul laguna
y el cielo doblado en ella.
Y el resplandor de la estrella.
Y la luna.

A tone of intimacy with nature is established, again conjoining the disparate spaces of water, the sky, and celestial bodies. Such a view of nature reflects the poet's own past, as he himself took on the same natural and elemental characteristics of his previous poetry:

En mi chaqueta de abril
prendí una azucena viva
y besé la sensitiva
con labios de toronjil.

Springtime here is not entirely personified or individualised, but forms a part of the individual persona of the poet, as it is likened to

his clothing, a reference to his own former phase of production. An even more telling reference to Darío and his influence can be seen in the metaphoric interlocutor of the bird: "Un pájaro principal / me enseñó el múltiple trino." The feeling of fraternity expressed here is on two compatible levels: the poet and nature, as well as the poet and poetry itself.

The fourth strophe of the poem, however, introduces a shift in movement and tone. The poet now expresses his feelings of anguish over the forced changes experienced in his life. Alluding to combat and strife, nature metaphors occupy the same discursive space as artificial weapons of destruction and destitution:

¿Y el plomo que zumba y mata?
 ¿Y el largo encierro?
 ¡Duro mar y olas de hierro,
 no luna y plata!

The feeling of tranquility so evident in *modernismo* has given way to sensations of suffering and trial, both personal and collective. The collective suffering of the Cuban people is subtly implied in the following quatrain, in which once again nature takes on bodily characteristics:

El cañaveral sombrío
 tiene voraz dentadura.
 ¡Que sepa el astro en su altura
 de hambre y frío!

The plight of the "cañaveral," in reality the people who live on it, is highlighted by describing it as a starved entity showing its teeth. Such "hambre" and "frío" are, however, still unknown to the star, alluding to *modernista* poetry which did not treat such themes. Social themes also become apparent with a more overt reference to human suffering: "Se alza el foete mayoral. / Espaldas hiere y desgarrá." Conflict among people ruptures the normally harmonious relationship between them and the universe. The poetic focus in Guillén's life has completed a major transition.

The final part of the poem can be seen in the last two lines of the sixth strophe and in the entire seventh strophe. Guillén addresses himself regarding the necessities of his own poetic creation in the imperative: "Ve y con tu guitarra / dílo al rosal." The self-referential aspect becomes evident once again as the music of the "guitarra," the poetry itself, must direct its social message to

the natural elements and to those who treat it in verse: the "rosal." The final strophe contains a tone of hope for the future. A new day dawns, and the natural elements must communicate the feelings of suffering people everywhere:

Dile también del fulgor
con que un nuevo sol parece:
en el aire que la mece,
que aplauda y grite la flor.

Suffering and hope form a dual bond between the poet and his audience, and nature serves as the metaphorical background by which this bond is described. Luis Iñigo Madrigal observes the concerns addressed in this work:

Este poema es ... también una historia y una teoría de la obra del propio poeta. En él se puede encontrar un juicio y una descripción de la primera etapa del autor, la anterior a *Motivos de son* ... la confesión de ciertas influencias ... y la justificación del uso de formas métricas específicas, como contiene no ya de motivos modernistas. ... Pero hay también un programa: represión, cárcel, explotación, miseria, injusticia son los motivos más dignos de canto; y hay además una indicación sobre a *quiénes* dirigir el canto. Hay, finalmente, una curiosa afirmación del carácter profético, social, del poeta. ... Los dos últimos versos son una mínima alegoría sobre la condición y la función del escritor. (*Summa poética* 41-42)

In another poem from this collection, "Un largo lagarto verde" (*Summa poética* 160-61), Guillén now uses nature to construct national identity. He treats the island of Cuba as though it were an animal in the ocean. The notion of animate nature is now transposed to a distinct geographical entity, as seen on a map. In three *décimas*, Guillén's geocentrism focuses on Cuba's animalisation, and not only its personification, in constructing a national image. From the beginning, the reader notes the sense of power, as well as elegance, ascribed to the sea:

Por el Mar de las Antillas
(que también Caribe llaman)
batida por olas duras
y ornada de espumas blandas.

The antithesis contained in "duras"—"blandas" lends the sea a

certain diversity of action as it pounds against the shoreline yet leaves fine traces of foam. The elements of the sun (representing fire) and the wind complement the other elements of water and land. All four classical elements are active participants in the life of Cuba and its surrounding area: "bajo el sol que la persigue / y el viento que la rechaza." A second antithesis is contained in "persigue"—"rechaza." Cuba is ascribed emotional characteristics, and the dual process of personification and animalisation becomes apparent:

cantando a lágrima viva
 navega Cuba en su mapa:
 un largo lagarto verde,
 con ojos de piedra y agua.

Treated as a mobile rather than a fixed entity with the inclusion of the verb "navegar," Cuba acquires emotional characteristics comparable to those of its citizens. Guillén relies on his familiarity with certain fauna and topographical features in constructing an image of a man-made nation. However, although a nation can only become such by the will of people, it would not exist were it not for an existing natural landscape on which it could be founded. Once again, people are still dependent on the natural world; a society, with its attendant notions of national or cultural identity, could not be formed without a physical environment. The formal elements mentioned above (such as the antithesis used in describing the sea) serve to reinforce Guillén's configuration of nature as animate and his construction of national and cultural identities.

The poet's emotional characterisation of his homeland becomes more developed in the second strophe, as the plight of its people is implied. The central focus becomes the sugarcane industry and its effects. Though native to Cuba and perennially a part of its lifeblood, sugarcane also represents interminable toil for the many people forced into harvesting. Guillén now describes Cuba as captive:

Alta corona de azúcar
 le tejen agudas cañas,
 no por coronada libre,
 sí de su corona esclava.

The antithesis of "libre"—"esclava" intends to portray the desired, and then actual, state of the Cuban condition. A sartorial metaphor

is mentioned with the idea of a crown sewn by the cane stalks. Shortly afterwards, additional sartorial metaphors are used:

reina del manto hacia fuera,
del manto adentro, vasalla,
triste como la más triste
navega Cuba en su mapa.

Two separate but related antitheses can be seen here: "fuera"—"adentro" and "reina"—"vasalla." Though appearing to be regal and queenly, Cuba's condition is better described as a vassal to a larger power.²² The adjective "triste" further personifies and animates the island. The unfortunate, paradoxical distinction of Cuba as both noble and captive likens its "corona esclava" to the crown of thorns worn by Christ during crucifixion. Once more, Guillén relies heavily on the formal element of antithesis in order to relay a larger message regarding nature, politics, and social justice.

The third strophe introduces an unnamed interlocutor, solely denoted as "tú" and "guardián marino," while the direction of poetic discourse shifts towards this interlocutor to provide a signal of Cuba's power. This form of direct address is seen in the opening of the strophe: "Junto a la orilla del mar, / tú que estás en fija guardia, / fíjate, guardián marino." The interlocutor here represents the sentinel of the Cuban people stationed at the seacoast. His fixed position, however, is contrasted with the mobility of the island itself and with its forcefulness, as he is called upon to bear witness:

en las puntas de las lanzas
y en el trueno de las olas
y en el grito de las llamas
y en el lagarto despierto
sacar las uñas del mapa.

This time, the "lizard" awakens and allows all of its energy free rein over the land. Such can be seen in the sound effects produced by "el trueno de las olas" and "el grito de las llamas," the latter being an instance of synaesthesia. Another antithesis can be observed in the "olas"—"llamas" pairing, as both opposites shout forth the island's power. The articulation of sound and emotion serves as a demonstration of Cuba's might, and its treatment as a lizard acting in harmony with the other elements legitimises its use of power to remain a singular and dignified entity, in spite of its perceived status as a pawn in the international capitalist market. As Ruscalleda

Bercedóniz observes regarding this poem, "En el romance *Un largo lagarto verde*, Guillén <<animaliza>> a Cuba (recurso de primera importancia en *El gran zoo*), esclava de la caña de azúcar" (124). Though forcibly humbled by its exploitative economic system, Cuba still maintains its sense of national pride through the use of a discursive system that presents it in active, vital terms, rather than passively and complacently.²³ The power of nature extends over its people, even when some people try to exploit it for economic gain. This poetics of nature militates against a long-standing notion of nature as subject to human domination. As Stein suggests with respect to the Euro-American cultural context,

within the practices of national conquest, as within the new sciences, the human subject was believed to be essentially divided from his natural object; knowledge, will, and agency were attributed only to the human actors, and any claim of nature's active participation in this exchange was categorically denied. Nature was deemed knowable and controllable, mere spiritless matter subsidiary to human needs and desires. (8-9)

In his own cultural-historical context as a Latin American writer, Guillén contests these same notions as well. This response to the socioeconomic and political plight of his land and people is accomplished through certain formal poetic techniques, such as the examples of synaesthesia and antithesis above. Instead of detracting from his poetic goals, such techniques carry a personal and political message in a poeticized format.

Guillén extends his characterisation of nature as a living entity beyond the boundaries of his own nation in "Chile" (*Summa poética* 168-69). In this instance, the land of Chile not only appears embodied and alive, but also is treated as the author's love object. In writing this poem, Guillén demonstrates how his concern with nature and national image building is not limited to his Cuban homeland. Composed of four principal quatrains and four secondary, parenthetical quatrains following each of the principal ones, the poem opens with a description of the land and its relation to the people:

Chile: una rosa de hierro
fija y ardiente en el pecho
de una mujer de ojos negros.
—Tu rosa quiero.

The "rosa" serves as a microcosm of the entire nation of Chile,

contained this time in the clothing worn by a woman. The traditional conceit of the rose here receives a new characterisation as an element of beauty and nature likened at once to an individual and to an entire country. Both the woman, as representative of the people, and the rose, as representative of the nation, are the first love objects mentioned in the poem; the blurring between nature and people serves both an aesthetic and a political purpose. (Guillén once more draws a connection between nature and women from a male, heterosexual perspective.) This type of synecdoche will be repeated through subsequent strophes; each part of Chile's landscape represents the whole and becomes an object of the narrator's love and respect. The parenthetical quatrain that follows introduces an emotional tone to the poem, one of sadness:

*(De Antofagasta vengo,
voy para Iquique;
tan sólo una mirada
me ha puesto triste.)*

The poet places himself within the land and sets the affective level of the poem, as his travels force him to recognise and to feel sorrow from "tan sólo una mirada triste."

Activity and violence of the word become the main markers of the second quatrain, though at the same time the poet expresses his undying love for the country in spite of the land's turmoil. Chile is now defined as

el salitral violento.
La pampa de puño seco.
Una bandera de fuego.
—Tu pampa quiero.

The violence contained in "violento," "puño" and "fuego" serves to highlight the stressful conditions of life on the "pampa" and for the Chilean people. Such violence does not prevent the poet from understanding Chile's circumstances or from expressing his love for the nation. Nevertheless, the poet cannot deny the sadness he feels upon continuing his journey, both literal and poetic, through the Chilean landscape:

*(Anduve caminando
sobre el salitre;
la muerte me miraba,
yo estaba triste.)*

Geographical space within the nation of Chile is transported to the literary space of the poem, which acquires the same rough-hewn, durable, melancholy and romantic qualities of the land it describes. At the same time, death itself is personified and treated as a character, as in "la muerte me miraba."

In the third principal quatrain, Chile is further personified, and its natural forces, reminiscent of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's treatment of the land, are ennobled and objectified by the poet's love.²⁴ Guillén addresses the nation:

Chile: tu verde silencio.
 Tu pie sur en un estrecho
 zapato de espuma y viento.
 —Tu viento quiero.

Its silent, stark landscape in the region of the Tierra del Fuego now becomes the principal focus of the poem, as the land assumes the form of a "pie" and a "zapato." This reference considers the actual shape of Chile, whose southernmost region is indeed shaped like a foot, curving around the continent of South America and joining with Argentina to form the land's end. The shoe worn by the Cape is one of "espuma" and "viento," linking together both the human and the natural realms. In the same region, even the animals come to feel the sadness that previously pervaded the poet:

*(El ovejero ladra,
 la tropa sigue;
 la oveja mira al perro
 con ojos tristes.)*

The final part of the poem moves from the terrestrial to the celestial realm and returns once again to the people. Speaking to Chile, Guillén addresses himself now to

tu blanco lucero.
 Tu largo grito de hielo.
 Tu cueca de polvo pueblo.
 —Tu pueblo quiero.

The movement of the strophe jumps rapidly from celestial space ("lucero") back down to the terrestrial ("hielo" and "pueblo.") In addition, the association of the "grito" with "hielo" adds a further sonic element to the treatment of the landscape. The "blanco

lucero" may also be a reference to the white star in the Chilean flag, referred to in the second main strophe as the "bandera de fuego." On this occasion, Guillén identifies himself directly with the people of Chile as well as with its land.

In the final parenthetical quatrain, sadness now pervades all corners of the cosmos, from the land to the moon. The spatial focus of the poem once again re-shifts from the terrestrial to the celestial:

*(En la cresta de un monte
la luna gime;
agua y nieve le lavan
la frente triste.)*

The moon acquires an expression of sadness as well as the capacity to voice that sadness; nature has become a personage in Guillén's aesthetics of nation. As the moon moans, its "frente triste" is gently washed by the water and the snow. Such disparate elements—water, snow, and moon—are connected not only by their colour (clarity or whiteness, on most occasions) but also by their purity and lonely features. An identification of "tierra" with "pueblo" is consolidated at the poem's end; though melancholy and subject to suffering, much as in the case of Cuba, the land and people together are ennobled and dignified by Guillén's poetic voice. As seen before in the case of Cuba, in considering the building of national identity, it is people who are ultimately subordinate to and dependent upon the land in which they live.

Later in the collection, the sonnet "A Guatemala"²⁵ provides a more traditional poetic form in which Guillén continues to appropriate nature to express ideals of political sympathy. In the first quatrain, Guillén describes the land of his birth, Cuba, identifying it by the familiar element of sugarcane:

*Nací donde la caña al cielo fino
su verde volador de un golpe lanza,
como una vegetal certera lanza
que traspasa al partir el aire fino.*

In the first half of this strophe, one notes the technique of hyperbaton, common to sonnets dating back to the Spanish Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Normally, the order of the sentence would read, "Nací donde la caña lanza de un golpe al cielo fino su verde volador.") The commercial industry

of cane harvesting is evoked as the author identifies himself with his people and land based on the one item common to all of Cuban society: "la caña."²⁶ Similarly, the second half of the strophe provides another inversion; its normal order would be "como lanza una vegetal certera que traspasa el aire fino al partir."

The journey from Cuba to Guatemala occurs in the second strophe, in which Guatemala becomes the narrator's dialogue partner. Speaking of himself in relation to Guatemala, Guillén writes:

El mar pasé. Las olas un camino
me abrieron al quetzal, que es tu esperanza:
hoy junto mi esperanza a tu esperanza,
juntas las dos, camino en tu camino.

The geographical space of the sea reveals a more figurative plane of emotional space, as the waves open a route to the "quetzal," symbol of the common hope shared by Guatemala and Guillén. The duality of Guillén and Guatemala structures the latter part of this strophe, as seen in the repetition of "esperanza" and "camino." The adjective "junto/juntas" also helps to complete this task, emphasizing togetherness. Again, people are inextricably linked to their natural surroundings.

The spaces of Cuba and Guatemala, synecdochically described as a sugarcane field and a banana patch, are evoked together in the first of the two tercets. These two spaces form one, sharing common emotional and spiritual values, as well as a common political aim: "Cañaveral y platanal, oscura / sangre derraman de una misma herida / de puñal, en la misma noche oscura." The bond between the two nations is formed by the intervening "puñal" and by the "oscura sangre" that it causes the two nations to spill. Such a violent act of exploitation logically occurs when humanity forgets its true relationship to nature. The corporeal, discursive system established for nature is now conjoined with political discourse, as a declaration of brotherhood between the two Latin American nations is necessitated.²⁷

Such brotherhood is emotionally presented in the final tercet, whose two most salient elements are "patria" and "herida": "¡Oh Guatemala con tu oscura herida! / ¡Oh Cuba, oh patria con tu herida oscura! / (Hay un sol que amanece en cada herida)." Though Cuba is the real "patria" of the author, both nations share equal status as they capture his sympathy for the plight of their land and of the working people whose lives are forged from it. The "herida"

and its adjective, "oscura," are continued from the previous strophe to describe the effects of the wounds felt by these two nations on both physical and emotional levels. As the wounds are deep and darkly stained from blood, and while the night is literally dark as well, the feelings of the people and of their poetic spokesperson are defined by the sufferings forced upon them. A transition occurs, however, in the final line of the poem, reminiscent of the "esperanza" predominant in the second strophe: "Hay un sol que amanece en cada herida." In such suffering, hope still springs eternal, reminiscent thematically and visually of the Pablo Picasso painting *Guernica*, in which amidst the carnage of the Spanish Civil War, a rose (once again, a well-known conceit used to portray beauty and life) is clutched in the hands of one of its many victims. The animate state of nature can be both positive and negative; if the land is capable of feeling and of providing life to its denizens, it follows that it is equally capable of suffering and of feeling a sense of fraternity towards other lands and peoples undergoing like experience. Starting with Guillén as a springboard, the poem moves from the individual to the collective, from Guillén himself to his own country and finally to Guatemala.²⁸

The same sense of brotherhood between Guillén and Guatemala is observed in a longer composition, "Balada guatemalteca" (*La paloma de vuelo popular* 59-60). Once again placing Guatemala within the text as a partner, Guillén affirms his sense of kinship with the fellow Latin American nation while flying over it. This relationship is opposed to the USA, alluded to by a disapproving description of nature through its most prominent heraldic symbol, the bald eagle. This symbol becomes a relatively exceptional example of nature seen as "negative," in this case for political reasons. The USA's national symbol does not form a positive part of Guillén's naturalised poetic cosmos, but rather invades it:

(Pareja con el avión
iba el águila imperial,
las duras alas tendidas
sobre la tierra y el mar.
Hoy vuela y vuela, mañana
ya no la verás volar.)

The kinship can be seen when the poet, while in flight, offers consolation to a lonely cloud:

Lloraba una nube sola

junto a la puerta del Cielo;
yo la vi desde mi avión
y le presté mi pañuelo.

The bond between poet and cloud is forged through the anthropomorphism of this natural entity. The solitary cloud is identified with the collective nation, while even an artificial entity, the airplane, is allowed to speak. Taking on human characteristics as well, it says to Guatemala, "que el yanqui de nuevo tala / bosques de sangre en tu suelo." The "sangre" refers to the blood of the Guatemalan people in their fight to retain sovereignty over their own lives; as such a collective vital fluid, it can also be considered the very blood of the Guatemalan soil itself. Blood thus represents another conceit in reinforcing Guillén's views of nature generally and, more specifically, the natural world in Latin America at the time; "nature" and "humanity" are once again conflated to send a powerful political and personal message.

Other celestial bodies above Guatemala also are accorded a corporeal characterisation: "Blanca estrella dolorosa / vi en el aire suspendida." As the sun "la consolaba," the airplane once again speaks to the nation below, describing it in terms of disturbing physical images:

¡Guatemala,
verte en la calle tendida,
rojo el pecho, rota un ala
y entre la muerte y la vida!

Likened to a bird whose wings have been broken, Guatemala represents one of many lands in Latin America whose freedom has been removed and whose abilities to exercise free will and to voice its anguish have been impeded. Guatemala, once the strong and noble quetzal bird, has been humbled to a state of disgrace by foreign oppression. The voice of the narrator quickly intervenes to provide the familiar tone of hope once again: "¡Espérame en Guatemala, / oh pura estrella encendida!" Both terrestrial and celestial spaces have the inherent ability to feel pain, a pain repeatedly caused by the "águila imperial" and soon to be vindicated. As Guillén concludes regarding this latter symbol, "¡Hoy mata y mata, mañana / ya no la verás matar!" Death is once again opposed to life since the death and suffering experienced by the Guatemalan land and people are not natural, but rather precipitated by intruding forces. However, life is seen as the

ultimate natural outcome for Guatemala. This binary, one of politics as well as natural states of being, is developed throughout the remainder of Guillén's career.

To complete the poems examined in this study, "Tres poemas mínimos" express this time a non-political treatment of nature while offering its traditional characterisation as an animate entity (*La paloma de vuelo popular* 87-88). Each poem is an eleven-line composition dedicated to one particular element of nature, starting with the "brizna," a blade of grass. Here, as on many other occasions, the blade of grass is treated as a familiar interlocutor with whom the poet feels a sense of intimacy and who is also described according to a system of exaggerated magnification. Beginning with the invocation, "Brizna, pequeño tallo / verde, en la tierra oscura," the poem develops into a rhetorical question in which the author sees this small entity in all its grandeur:

¿de qué selva minúscula
eres baobab, de cuántos
pájaros-pulgas guardan
nidos en tus fuertes ramas?

The paradox of "selva minúscula" makes the reader aware of the importance ascribed to a normally overlooked object such as a blade of grass. With such a relationship between subject and object, Guillén chooses to focus on the positive aspects of one of the smallest natural elements and to amplify it. In addition, the relationship between subject and object becomes defined by the function of the latter with respect to the former. In this case, the "brizna" serves as the subject's peaceful bed: "yo durmiendo a tu sombra, / para soñar, echado / bajo la luna." The "brizna" is likened to a full-scale "árbol" which provides shade and tranquillity to the poet.

The second of these three poems also contains images of active, animate nature, this time with respect to the air:

Brisa que apenas mueves
las flores, sosegada,
fino aliento del carmen
que blandamente pasas.

The light breeze is mobile, regardless of how slightly it sets the flowers ajar, and provides a gentle sensation not only for the poetic subject but also for the reader. The subject then makes a kind

demand to the wind, as one notes again the interdependence between object and subject: "ven y empuja mi barca, / presa en el mar inmóvil." The association of the minuscule with the gigantic is elaborated in the remainder of the strophe, as the technique of magnification is again used to ennoble this natural element and to highlight its importance. The narrator addresses the breeze using the imperative:

Llévame, poderosa,
en tus mínimas alas,
oh, brisa, fino aliento,
brisa que apenas mueves
las flores sosegada.

Finally, the element of light—nature's energy rather than its matter—takes on characteristics of power, again creating a relationship of dependence for the poetic subject. The small point of light becomes magnified when viewed with respect to its original source: "Punto de luz, suspenso / lampo, remota estrella, / tú, sol de otros planetas." Hyperbole and repetition are then used to describe the starlight: "bien que apenas te veo, / allá lejos, lejísimos, / muy lejos." Though originating from a distant corner of the universe, the starlight has an immediate impact on the life of the subject who gratefully receives it. It is as beneficial to life as other elements examined:

¿podré pedirte el fuego,
la luz y que madures
mis frutos, oh suspenso
lampo, remota estrella,
tú, sol de otros planetas?

Even a point of light attains relevance in the life of a common man millions of miles away, since the fire illuminates and enlivens the crops upon which he depends. In general, an interdependent and harmonious view of humanity's relationship to nature is evident in these short compositions, and all four classical elements of nature are a part of this worldview: earth ("brizna," "frutos"), wind ("brisa"), water ("mar"), and fire ("luz," "fuego," "sol.") In poems such as these, Guillén once more emphasises what Cheng had observed about the relationship between humankind and nature: it is a "part-whole" dialectic before anything else.

A Lyrical Cosmos

When Nicolás Guillén died, he left behind a prolific, multifaceted legacy of poetic production. Throughout more than half a century, Guillén's poetry underwent various changes. Across this development, however, a key factor remained constant: the treatment of nature as an organic, animate entity, whose life and very essence give form and meaning to humanity. The ultimate interdependence of nature and people is one of Guillén's poetic hallmarks. Such a view of nature, and especially of its relationship to humanity, was amplified to apply to all of Latin America, whose people receive lyrical treatment in Guillenean discourse.²⁹

It should be clear that Guillén has accomplished several goals in treating nature as animate. In creating this lyrical cosmos, he humanises the physical environment and shows that it possesses a life worth respecting as much as human life. This does not mean that he magically "wills" nature to become alive; rather, he reveals that nature has always been living and that one can see it in terms familiar to, but not necessarily dependent upon, people. Nature also is used to advocate ideas about nationality, politics, international relations, and general kinship.³⁰ Guillén creates his own myth of personal and collective identity as rooted in an intimate relationship to, and understanding of, the living world. Without the mountains, rivers, trees, and animals, for instance—elements that often have a long history of serving as popular conceits in poetic discourse—neither Guillén nor his people would exist. At the same time, however, Guillén believes nature to be on his side in what he views as a larger struggle against imperialism and exploitation. The places he writes about acquire the importance of sacred spaces for Guillén, and implicitly for everyone (even though Guillén does not poetically treat everyone the same way, as his characterisations of women, as opposed to men, have shown). In sum, the natural world is a tool for self-validation, ideological expression, and cultural identification. Guillén leaves his readers with a profound sense of the difficulty of defining or containing nature and of its interconnected, nuanced relationship to people and culture.

NOTES

- 1 For an analysis of Guillén's poems on nature written after the Cuban Revolution, see Mark J. Mascia, "The Pulse of Latin America: Nature and Discourse in Nicolás Guillén's *Tengo*," *Aleph* 11 (1996): 40-65. *Tengo* was published in 1964, and its tone of positive triumph

contrasts somewhat with the hopeful militancy of many of Guillén's pre-Castro poems, though the same basic themes and treatment of nature persist.

- 2 Eugenio Florit has characterised this collection as a serious body of work from its beginning, though he also adds that in its portrayal of humankind, for all of its vices and problems, the reader can feel a positive reaction. As he observes, "Porque sólo cuando nos damos cuenta de nuestro papel de hombres en un mundo despreciable, y egoísta, y malo, es cuando podemos reír, y bailar nuestro baile, blanco o negro": "Nicolás Guillén, poeta entero," *Revista de América* 13 (February 1948): 245.
- 3 Nicolás Guillén, *Summa poética*, ed. Luis Iñigo Madrigal (Madrid: Cátedra, 1990), 93-94.
- 4 Iñigo Madrigal's note, *Summa poética*, 93.
- 5 This mythological character can be understood, in part, as a personage originally derived from animistic legend: "Although the concept of the *güije* may have its foundation in animism, it is not examined from that perspective in this poem. The mythological *güije* who is introduced here has taken on human proportions to such a degree that he in fact appears as a defined persona, man-like, as capricious as Neptune, and separate from the river to the point that all physical connection with nature appears to be lost." See Kay Boulware-Miller, "Nicolás Guillén's 'Balada del güije': An Experiment in Folklore," *Vórtice* 2.2-3 (1979): 209. The *güije* does maintain a connection to nature, in that it springs autochthonously from the water. Boulware-Miller means to suggest that, in Afro-Cuban folklore, the *güije* is real and becomes detached from nature in the same manner that a human being is an individual entity, capable of moving about and acting on his or her own volition within the natural world.
- 6 Angel Augier, "Una descripción geográfica," in *Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén*, ed. Nancy Morejón (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1974), 268.
- 7 Günter W. Lorenz, "Diálogo con Miguel Angel Asturias," *Mundo Nuevo* 43 (1970): 49.
- 8 Boulware-Miller has studied the connections between animism and specific Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions in her analysis of the "Balada del güije." Animism plays a large role as well not only in Guillén's work (in addition to the role of individual identification and anthropomorphism, as mentioned above), but also in the Caribbean area generally. As she notes, "Animism is closely associated with Afro-Cuban mythology where reverent attitudes towards nature are systematically reflected in religious beliefs and organizations" (207). This belief system is as valid for Guillén and his heritage as the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam might be for observers of the western tradition, for example. Additionally, by the

inclusion of Afrocentric elements in his poetry, Guillén gives blacks a literary voice that they previously had been denied. As Constance Sparrow de García Barrio has examined, "Prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, the image of blacks in Spanish-American literature had been limited to a few prototypes. This repertoire included the black as a physical dynamo, the meek and loyal slave, the sexually stirring mulatto woman, and the brave Afro-Spanish-American soldier fighting in the service of colonial authorities. Blacks themselves, during the colonial period, were rarely in a position to contribute to the making of their own literary image." See "The Image of the Black Man in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén," in *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Miriam DeCosta (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1977), 105. However, one must consider that at times, Guillén himself falls into some of this typecasting, notably the treatment of the black or mulatto woman as sexually attractive and "earthy," as shall be observed in this study.

- 9 Some scholars have noted that there may be another dimension entirely in understanding this poem. As many lesser-educated Cubans, without the means to acquire proper healthcare, may have attributed certain diseases caused by pathogens in local rivers to a *güije*, Guillén might add a subtle tone of protest to his poem. In this instance, it would indicate Guillén's dismay with respect to the poverty, ignorance, and unhealthy lifestyle of many of his disadvantaged fellow Cuban citizens. As Andre Michalski has observed, "Así, en la <<Balada>>, además del elemento misterioso o sobrenatural hay que observar un fuerte acento de protesta social, aunque aquí expresada de una manera más bien indirecta. Parece que Guillén critica aquí no sólo la pobreza y falta de atenciones médicas que conducen a muertes como la del niño en el poema, sino también la ignorancia en que está sumido el pueblo, y que como únicos medios de defensa contra las enfermedades cuenta con collares mágicos y conjuros": *Cuadernos hispanoamericanos* 274 (April 1973): 165. In addition to this type of protest, Guillén subtly provides a counterpoint to colonialist, rationalist, and Eurocentric discourse. The very language of the "Balada del güije" and of numerous other poems by Guillén is itself an example of an effort to reclaim the non-European from the state of being the Other. Josaphat B. Kubayanda has characterised this trend in Guillén as one of reterritorialisation: "The early Guillén also realizes that the national language was used historically as a means of homogenization and as a machinery of deterritorialization (or marginalization). However, the Other has always survived by a process of self-reterritorialization which, in turn, has its source in ancestral and collective codes. ... Self-consciousness is always related to an other consciousness, a schema which destroys the colonial notion of territoriality or possessiveness": "On Discourse of Decolonialization in Africa and the Caribbean,"

Dispositio 14.36-38 (1989): 32-33.

- 10 Nicolás Guillén, *Obra poética 1920-1958*, ed. Angel Augier (La Habana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1974), 193-95.
- 11 In this instance, Guillén is Pan-Caribbean for his refusal to narrow himself to solely Cuban-based themes and contexts. His inclusiveness of other geographical spaces may owe itself to his racially mixed parentage as well as his political beliefs, as Luis F. González-Cruz has observed: "A mulatto, Guillén has the privilege of belonging to both cultures. Raised as a white, with all the sophistication of European manners, he is also part black. In addition, Guillén has been, since his early youth, an active Marxist and Communist Party member. His poetry, therefore, plays a fundamental social and political role": "Nature and the Black Reality in Three Caribbean Poets," *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature* 5 (1979): 143. Guillén's dream as a poet did include these ideals of racial harmony and ideological commitment, as the contemporary Cuban poet and critic Nancy Morejón has defined. In so infusing his poetry with these ideals, she finds, Guillén includes the element of telluric, natural power to his work: "Nicolás Guillén, entretanto, sublima, hasta llevarlo a la realidad, su sueño de hacer una nación a la medida de su mestizaje (étnico y cultural). En la tensión racial que originan los dos componentes que integran la nacionalidad cubana, supo avizorar Guillén toda la fuerza telúrica de su Isla": "El concepto de nacionalidad en Nicolás Guillén," *Casa de las Américas* 22.128 (September-October 1981): 42.
- 12 The relationship between women, nature, and sexual identity has been studied by many scholars. Though the typecasting of women as being "earthy" or close to the physical world does exist in literature, Guillén included, it is not meant negatively here. In Guillén's case, the identification of black women specifically with nature is also observable on numerous occasions. This tradition is common to much Caribbean literature, with of course Guillén's own variation of it: "En la literatura caribeña, tanto de habla española como francesa, se percibe con frecuencia un gusto por la identificación de la mujer con elementos de la naturaleza como los frutos o el agua, entre otros ... en la poética de Nicolás Guillén encontramos además de la abundancia de elementos del mundo vegetal para simbolizar la feminidad, un gusto por el simbolismo animal que, curiosamente, es más frecuente cuando el referente es la mujer negra": Ignacio López Calvo, "La mujer en Nicolás Guillén: Símbolos botánicos y animales," *Revista/Review Interamericana* 26.1-4 (1996): 117. For one of many alternative views, see Carol P. McCormack, "Nature, culture and gender: a critique," in *Nature, Culture, and Gender*, ed. Carol P. McCormack and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1-24. McCormack's study perceptively focuses on the constructed links conjoining societies and gender, and in so doing challenges the often-assumed bipolar relationships of

nature/culture, woman/man, and wild/tame. Her study specifically targets structuralist philosophy and anthropology. As she observes, "the link between nature and women is not a 'given'. Gender and its attributes are not pure biology. The meanings attributed to male and female are as arbitrary as are the meanings attributed to nature and culture. ... Those who have developed the nature-culture-gender thesis root femaleness in biology and maleness in the social domain. ... However, if men and women are one species and together constitute human society then, logically, analysis of intrinsic gender attributes must be made with reference to the same domain" (18). Another excellent study of women, race, and nature is Vera Norwood, *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Though written within a North American context, Norwood's analysis can still apply to the literature examined here. She points out that conjoining women and people of colour with nature was often forced for the purposes of domination and suppression (174-75), a fact that Guillén, writing from a different cultural frame of reference, apparently misses.

- 13 Ian I. Smart, "Mulatex and the Image of the Black *Mujer nueva* in Guillén's Poetry," *Romance Quarterly* 29.4 (1982): 384. Other scholars have also viewed Guillén's treatment of women in a positive light, often without taking into account the *machista* codes pervasive in this type of discourse. For instance, Armando González-Pérez also lauds Guillén's portrayal of "las hembras elementales," opining that "Guillén no se conforma con sólo evocar la belleza primitiva de esta mujer simbólica sino que mediante un lenguaje más directo y claro logra crear una constelación de imágenes sensoriales altamente eróticas al describir con fruición la atracción sexual de la negra y la mulata": "Raza y eros en la poesía afrocubana de Nicolás Guillén," in *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*, ed. Reinaldo Sánchez, José Antonio Madrigal, and José Sánchez Boudy (Miami: Ed. Universal, 1978), 159. It should be noted that statements like these are often produced from the discursive standpoint of Latino societies, where *machista* codes are more openly displayed and accepted.
- 14 "Otra cara de Costa Rica a través de un testimonio ecofeminista," *Hispanic Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1998): 317.
- 15 The concept of *mestizaje* refers to various types of blending. First, it denotes a genetic blending of white and black people throughout Cuban history, as well as a blending of such groups with indigenous peoples in Latin America as a whole. Secondly, it refers to a cultural blending of different sets of core values derived from both European and African societies, in the case of Cuba. Finally, in Guillén's poetry especially, it includes the blending of different elements of the physical cosmos and of humankind as a whole. Guillén's ancestry, as already mentioned, is itself mixed. However, his own *mestizaje* is, in

the final analysis, transcendental, for in divergence and difference he finds convergence and commonality. As Robert Carballo has described, "in defining the African presence within the larger Cuban culture Guillén has confronted the dynamics and complexities of place and a sense of otherness, as well as the creative and even sonorous tension between black and white, African and European. The end-product is a poetry reflective of a vibrant national identity, not always at peace with itself but sharply aware and appreciative of the rich cultures from which it stems. Guillén, in effect, is the eminent painter of what he called '*el color cubano*' (the Cuban color), and that composition is surely not monochromatic—it transcends race, culture and ideology": "Place and Otherness: The Consolidation of a National Identity in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén," *Revista/Review Interamericana* 26.1-4 (1996): 109.

- 16 *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén (Cuatro elementos sustanciales)* (Río Piedras: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1975), 272. As is shown in this study, however, Ruscalleda Bercedóniz' perspective is not the only one regarding the nature of the relationship between people and the environment. One other study worth mentioning is, once again, Norwood's. She posits that one of the underlying values of Judeo-Christian views of nature is that of the subordination of women to men (262-63). Much the same way that people were seen to "dominate" nature, so were men (considered "rational" and belonging to the realm of culture) given free rein to oppress women (seen as "earthy" and "emotional," and belonging to the realm of nature).
- 17 John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington, ed. and introd., *Reading under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), xv. For another study of the relationship between humanity and nature, from an integrationist point of view and within a Latin American cultural context, see Roberto Forns-Broggi, "¿Cuáles son los dones que la naturaleza regala a la poesía latinoamericana?," *Hispanic Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1998): 209-38.
- 18 Rachel Stein, *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 10-11.
- 19 *La poesía afrocubana de Nicolás Guillén* (Montevideo: Editorial Arca, 1962), 83.
- 20 Aimin Cheng, "Humanity as 'A Part and Parcel of Nature': A Comparative Study of Thoreau's and Taoist Concepts of Nature," in *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, ed. Richard J. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 207.
- 21 The aesthetics of Latin American *modernismo* included a valorisation of chromatic images, physical sensations and moods, and exoticism unfettered by bourgeois demands. This movement, corresponding approximately to the period between the 1890s and the First World

War, included a number of Latin American (and European) poets who sought beauty for its own sake and who did not always advocate socio-political concerns within their art. Guillén started his career still under the influence of *modernismo* in the 1920s, but moved away from it permanently, much like some other contemporaries. Darío is credited with being the progenitor of Latin American *modernismo*.

- 22 This contrast brings to mind several opposition scenarios. For example, the relationship of queen to vassal reminds the reader to consider Cuba's long history of slavery and forced harvesting of sugarcane at the hands of landowners. This opposing pair also forces one to consider Cuba's political periods of dependence on other powers, notably its relationship to Spain before 1898, the year of the Spanish-American War, and its relationship to the United States (for American military and economic interests) in the twentieth century before 1959.
- 23 This discursive system of treating nature as animate, and of relating the thoughts and feelings of human beings to the natural world, is not unlike what some scholars have seen in the American poet Walt Whitman's views. As Diane Kepner has stated, "the relation between things and thoughts ... can be proved not by resort to philosophical logic or scientific calculation but by direct observation of the visible world": "From Spears to Leaves: Walt Whitman's Theory of Nature in *Song of Myself*," *American Literature* 51.2 (May 1979): 183. Guillén's poetry is meant to convey ideas and beliefs through precisely this sort of sensorial empiricism. Though not a scientific empiricism per se, Guillén's way of portraying objects in the natural world, as well as people, bases itself on observed associations. This, too, resembles Whitman's concept of nature: "By finding common properties in unlike objects, specifically between the self and something else, the poet is unveiling possibilities that a scientific description of those objects would probably ignore. ... The universe is an association of particular objects engaged in a continuous process of reassociation" (Kepner 197). Association does not imply that humankind is necessarily the centre of the natural world, but rather a part of it.
- 24 Guillén's literary contemporary and political coreligionist, the poet Pablo Neruda, often also used similar natural motifs to inspire a vision of his native Chile as an animate entity. See, for example, Pablo Neruda, *Canto general* (Barcelona: Editorial Bruguera, S.A., 1986), and *Odas elementales* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, S.A., 1985).
- 25 Nicolás Guillén, *La paloma de vuelo popular. Elegías* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, S. A., 1979), 57.
- 26 For a detailed examination of Guillén's treatment of the sugarcane industry throughout his poetry, see Antonio Benítez-Rojo, "Nicolás Guillén and Sugar," *Callaloo* 10.2 (Spring 1987): 329-51. Also, see Keith Ellis, "Images of Sugar in English and Spanish Caribbean

Poetry," *Ariel* 24.1 (January 1993): 149-59.

- 27 Nature, politics, and autobiography are intertwined at the stage in which Guillén writes poems like this one. In *La paloma de vuelo popular*, Guillén keeps Cuba firmly in mind due to his exile; his feeling of kinship with other Latin American countries comes naturally as a consequence of his own life and the historical context of the time. Nature is a part of this problematic, but not perfectly so; as Keith Ellis has observed, "nature is examined from the point of view of its incapacity for helping the poet to achieve his obsession, which is to make possible the end of his period of exile from Cuba": "Images of Black People in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 7.1-3 (January-September 1988), 21.
- 28 The manner of portraying nature as capable of feeling—in this instance, Guatemala and its humanised pain and struggle—is also a trait shared by other poets, including Whitman once again. Feeling, in Guillén's and Whitman's case, also implies self-perpetuation and strength. As Bruce Piasecki has noted with respect to the latter poet, "nature was principally conceived in terms of the sexual images of receptivity, resilience, and fecundity. The ultimate reality which was the source and foundation of all else was thought of anthropomorphically": "Conquest of the Globe: Walt Whitman's Concept of Nature," *Calamus* 23 (June 1983): 36. Again, however, the use of this human-centred imagery denotes only the fact that poets such as Guillén and Whitman use terminology familiar to them, rather than the notion that they view themselves as superior to nature.
- 29 Indeed, Guillén is not the only Latin American poet who has treated some of these same themes, and who feels a shared kinship with all Latin American cultures. Mirta Aguirre's view of Guillén is that of a poet who speaks for the continent as a whole, among others: "No nos han faltado otras voces grandes que reflejaran, como César Vallejo, la tristeza de nuestra indiada, nuestra soledad y nuestra miseria; o que supieran y quisieran ser como el Pablo Neruda posterior a *Residencia en la Tierra*; pero Nicolás Guillén, que aportó el sufrimiento negro, ha sido la más insistente y robusta voz continental": *Un poeta y un continente* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1962), 68.
- 30 One must bear in mind the long-standing human tradition of conjoining natural observation with national, political, or social identification. Simon Schama, in his landmark study of people and their constructions of nature, has observed this one common characteristic to many, if not all, human cultures. This cultural trait is indeed very powerful, and although Schama does not mention the case of Guillén specifically, his commentary would cover him and many others from around the world: "It is clear that inherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics:

their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with. National identity, to take just the most obvious example, would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland. ... And landscapes can be self-consciously designed to express the virtues of a particular political or social community": *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 15.