

# Negritude in Peruvian Poetry: the Legacy of Nicomedes Santa Cruz

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# Afro-Peruvian Past

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*Lo mejor de lo que ha pasado a Indias se nos olvidaba, que son los españoles y los negros ...aunque a los negros los esclavizaron después [We were forgetting the best import into Indies, namely the Spaniards and the Negroes... although the Negroes were enslaved after] (Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, 1609, 606).*

*Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru, Vol. I, Book IX, Chapter. XXXI.*

The African presence in Peru is as old as the Spanish, and dates back to 1532.

## article, El Negro en Ibero América (1988)

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- Facing the atrocity of colonial slavery, the social phenomena of collective rebellions of enslaved people, cimarrones, and palenques (hidden towns of cimarrones) emerged. These were expressions of dignity and of self-liberation or resistance in response to the colonial system.

# Perú: Struggle for Independence (1780-1821)

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- High percentage of free Blacks and slaves got involved in the armed struggle against Spanish colonial power (Martinez 1999). Moreover, the members of the independence movement (indigenous, blacks, mestizos, mulattes, and whites) were inspired by the ideals of Tupac Amaru II rebellion (1780-1781), and the French and Haitian revolutions which promised the abolition of slavery. After the Proclamation of Peruvian Independence in 1821, there were 41,000 persons living in slavery.
- During those years, 50% of Lima's population was Black people.

# Search for National Identity

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- In the first half of the twentieth century, most of the national debates on Peruvian identity issues focused on a dispute between indigenists and hispanists intellectuals about where to locate the main source of the national identity. Both groups devalued Afro-Peruvian contributions in the construction of Peruvian identity. Indigenists and hispanists believed that the national identity issue involved basically three alternatives: it came from Spain, from the Incas, or from both sources. The existence of an Afro-Peruvian legacy was ignored by most participants in those debates.

# The Mestizo Country

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- According to Marisol de la Cadena in “The Racial Politics of Culture and Silent Racism in Peru” (2001), the Hispanic elite designed a *mestizo* model that asserted its own dominant position in the country and Western hegemony across the world. Its rhetorical strategy was to avoid biological notions of race, but to use a culturalist notion of it.

# Afro-Peruvian Situation

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- They comprise around 5% of the total Peruvian population (32,000,000).
- In response to their historical and structural exclusion, different Black poets, musicians, and writers affirm, revalue, and celebrate their social identities as Afro-Peruvians. Moreover, they unfold narratives and describe social experiences that had been systematically omitted from official history, and they form political visions that incorporate notions of ethnic justice. This collective process of exploration of their ethnic heritage, self-affirmation, and search for political recognition constitutes the Peruvian Negritude.

# Nicolás Guillén & Cuban Negrismo

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- *Negrismo* emerged in Guillén (1902-1989) as a literary and political movement in order to address main socio-political issues of the new Cuban Republic. Guillén thought that these issues were consequences of the Spanish colonial past and US neocolonialism in the present. Guillén believed in the political function of literature. He stated that “el arte sirve a lo político” [art serves politics] (*Páginas Vueltas*, p. 117)



# From Cuba to Perú

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- The book *Son Entero* (1947) by Guillén was the first one that Nicomedes Santa Cruz (1925-1992) studied seriously. Santa Cruz described this literary encounter:
- “If I had not read that book I do not know what would have happened to me, because Nicolas Guillen made a tremendous impact on me, because I found a popular poetry that reconciles the art of literary creativity with the highest poetry and a highly political message, an anti-imperialist denunciation, an anti-slavery condemnation; and everything is harmonized”

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My dear pal Nicomedes:  
Do you remember me? We were brought together to America;  
we suffered and stood in the same slave ship.  
Now we are together again in Rebellion and Victory!  
Love, Nicolás.  
Nicolás Guillén. La Habana – Cuba 1974



# Contradictions: Democracy & Capitalism (& Racism)

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- The ideological conflict between modern political thinking and the colonial/capitalist exploitation of dark skin people was one of the motifs that crossed Santa Cruz's work. He built a Black identity, aware of this tension between these worldviews/interests and proposed a political modernity (freedom, equality and solidarity) rooted in the everyday life of peoples as a process of social liberation.

## De ser como soy, me alegro (1949)

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De ser como soy, me alegro;  
ignorante es quien critica.  
Que mi color sea negro  
eso a nadie perjudica.

To be as I am, I am glad;  
ignorant is the one who criticizes.  
It is not harm to anybody  
that my color is black.

## De ser como soy, me alegro (II)

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De los pies a la cabeza  
soy un hombre competente:  
nado contra la corriente  
sin humillar la cabeza.

From the feet to the head  
I am a competent man:  
I swim against the current  
without humiliating my head.

## De ser como soy, me alegro (III)

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muy claramente se explica  
que viviendo con honor  
nacer de cualquier color,  
eso a nadie perjudica.

it is explained very clearly that  
born of any color  
if we live with honor  
it does not harm anyone.

# Ritmos Negros del Perú (1957)

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De África llegó mi abuela  
vestida con caracoles,  
la trajeron lo'epañoles  
en un barco de carabela.

From Africa my grandmother arrived  
dressed with snails,  
The Spaniards brought her  
in a caravel boat.

# Negritude as a Mission

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- For Santa Cruz, Negritude in Peru was a mission to continue historical struggles against the remnants of colonial systems of ethnic oppression and against current capitalist exploitation. The proclamation of political independence from Spain (1821) promised the freedom, equality and solidarity for all Peruvian people. However, Indigenous and Black peoples, the most oppressed by the colonial order, were still oppressed in the Peruvian republic due to the persistence of colonial racism across all social spheres and the continuity of an economic system based on human exploitation.



# Blackness as a Social Construction

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- Santa Cruz's conception of blackness was not essentialist but constructivist historicist: “pretender identificar la cultura a partir de la raza es seguir hundido en la alienación, porque esa trampa hace mucho que la armó el colonizador en su propio beneficio” [to try to identify culture based on race is to be wrong in the alienation, because that trap was made by the colonizer long time ago] (*Obras Completas II*, p. 232). His disagreement with the essentialist idea of blackness was expressed in 1960 in the preface to the poem “Meme Neguito”: “I do not believe in black poetry, because I neither believe in ‘white poetry’ or in ‘blue poetry’ (*Obras Completas I*, p. 311).

# América Latina (1963)

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Las mismas caras latinoamericanas  
De cualquier punto de América Latina:  
Indoblanquinegros  
Blanquinegrindios  
Y negrindoblancos...

Nací cerca de Cuzco  
Admiro a Puebla  
Me inspira el ron de las Antillas  
Canto con voz argentina  
Creo en Santa Rosa de Lima  
Y en los Orishas de Bahía.

The same Latin American faces  
From anywhere in Latin America:  
Indian-White-Blacks  
White-Black-Indians  
And Black-Indian-Whites...

I was born near to Cusco  
I admire Puebla  
The Caribbean rum is my inspiration  
I sing with Argentinean voice  
I believe in Santa Rosa from Lima  
And in the Orishas of Bahia.

# Historical Unity & Plurality

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Santa Cruz saw Latin American people as a plurality inside a historical and cultural unity. Santa Cruz thought that Indigenous, Europeans, and Africans formed the cultural/historical core that characterizes Peruvian and Latin American peoples. In some way, he saw Latin America as a plural unity. For him, other heritages are articulated this core.

# Embracing Cultural Diversity

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- Santa Cruz's cultural project was committed to recreate and to enrich the culture of the African Diaspora in Latin America. He was not concerned about pure African roots related to an intact or fixed past, but about popular traditions related to the historical experience of African descendants in this region. Santa Cruz saw in these popular traditions the historical interaction among Indigenous, European, African, Middle Eastern, and Asian cultures.

# Negritude & Democratization

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- His Negritude stood for the cultural and ethnic democratization of Peru, Latin America, and the world. He opposed all forms of segregation that tried to put social groups in confined boxes. Santa Cruz thought this process would, also, push the democratization of economic and political structures everywhere. He thought that the development of a historical consciousness and cultural identity awareness were key steps for the inclusiveness and democratization of power structures.

# Sudáfrica (1963)

Que esta no es cuestión de gotas  
ni melanina mas o menos...

Uhuru!

Africa, izwe lethu  
(Africa, nuestra tierra)  
debe sernos devuelta.

Causachum!

Causachum llactanchis!  
(Que viva nuestra tierra!)  
unida, libre y nuestra.

This is not about drops  
nor more or less melanin...

Uhuru!

Africa, izwe lethu  
(Africa, our land)  
it has to be returned to us.

Hurrah

Long life to our people  
(Hurrah for our land!)  
united, free, and ours.

# El Canto del Pueblo (1974)

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Tras la ultima batalla,  
libre la gente oprimida,  
vendrá otro canto a la vida  
porque el cantor nunca calla:  
¡Este es el himno que estalla  
en notas primaverales,  
y a sus acordes triunfales  
todos los seres humanos  
al fin se sienten hermanos  
porque todos son iguales...!

After the last battle,  
when the oppressed people become  
free,  
another song will come to life  
because the singer never shuts down:  
This is the hymn that blows up  
in Spring notes,  
and according to its triumphant  
chords  
all human beings  
will finally feel like brothers and  
sisters  
because all of them are equal!

# Resistance: Colonization & Neocolonization

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- The aim was to put an end to the oppression that has historically built the inequalities between peoples, in order to achieve the political ideal of freedom, equality & solidarity. Santa Cruz' reading of Latin American history emphasizes different popular resistances to the military, cultural, political and economic oppression of the Spanish colonization and the current Anglo-Saxon neo-colonization. In the global context, Santa Cruz saw neo-colonizing interests of the Western capitalist powers as a central problem of the world.



## Asia (1973)

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Unámonos los pueblos del tercer mundo  
y hagámoslo el Primero de los Mundos.

Let's join the peoples of the third world  
and let's make it the First of the Worlds.

# Global Struggles for Justice

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- Santa Cruz believed that global decolonization would let the reconciliation and mutual recognition among all nations begin to unfold. These processes include, on the cultural side, an exploration of complementary and common content of popular narratives and cultures. On the political side, they include the democratization of economic and political structures. From a *mestizo-negritude*, Nicomedes Santa Cruz's great project of political modernity is the decolonization of cultural, economic & political structures.

# Santa Cruz' books, recordings, & papers

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Books: Décimas (1959), Cumanana (1964), Canto a mi Perú (1966), Ritmos Negros del Perú (1971), Rimactampu: Rimas al Rímac (1972), La Décima en el Perú (1982).

Records: Gente Morena (1957), Nicomedes Santa Cruz y su Conjunto Kumanana (1959), Inga (1960), Décimas y Poemas (1960), Cumanana (1964), Octubre Mes Morado (1965), Canto Negro (1968), Los Reyes del Festejo (1971), América Negra (1972), Nicomedes en Argentina (1973), Socabón (1975), Ritmos Negros del Perú (1979), Décimas y Poemas (1980).

Papers: Aportes de las civilizaciones africanas al folklore del Perú, Senegal, (1974). Hispanidad y Negritud, Guinea Ecuatorial, (1984). Racismo, discriminación racial y etnocentrismo, Panamá (1988). Flujo y reflujo de la marea cultural afro-caribeña, Puerto Rico, (1989).