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Miguel Arnedo-Gómez. *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation: Blackness, Afro-Cuban Culture and Mestizaje in the Prose and Poetry of Nicolás Guillén*. Bucknell University Press, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Miguel Arnedo-Gómez. *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation: Blackness, Afro-Cuban Culture and Mestizaje in the Prose and Poetry of Nicolás Guillén*. Bucknell UP, 2016. 274 pp.

Keywords

cuban poetry, race, mestizaje, afro-Brazilian identity, Latin American literature

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In his study of Nicolás Guillén's pre-revolutionary writing, Miguel Arnedo-Gómez aims to identify a specifically Cuban construct of blackness, which he justly argues has been hitherto overlooked in the scholarship on Guillén. Arnedo-Gómez presents *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation* as a literary study with extensive grounding in the racial politics and black cultural production of 1930s Cuba. The author aims to understand the "1930s Cuban black ideological formations that allowed Guillén to develop a distinctively black take on the ideology of mestizaje" (xii) through a "semiotic analysis of Guillén's poems as cultural constructs" while "taking into account the social discourses through which his contemporaries experienced his work" (xxviii).

The book comprises an introduction, six chapters, and a brief conclusion. In the introduction, Arnedo-Gómez offers a brief overview of Guillén's work and an extensive review of existing scholarship on the author, heavily contextualized within Alejandro de la Fuente's writing on race and nation in pre-revolutionary Cuba. The first chapter focuses on Afro-Cuban reformulations of *Afrocubanismo* 'Afro-Cubanism' and *mestizaje* 'miscegenation.' The second chapter focuses on Guillén's treatment of racism in his journalistic writing from 1930s. In chapter 3, Arnedo Gómez identifies a subversive quality in Guillén's use of lower-class black narrators to depict intra-racial discrimination in *Motivos del son* ('Reasons of the Son'). In chapter 4, Arnedo-Gómez aims to counter interpretations of Guillén's "harmonious" mixed-race identity through an examination of poetic representations of *mestizaje*. Chapter 5 studies Guillén's *Sóngoro cosongo* ('Cosongo Symphony'), his second collection of black poetry. In contrast to previous readings of this work (such as that by Roberto Fernández Retamar) that identified a homogenizing or whitening tendency in *Sóngoro cosongo*, Arnedo-Gómez focuses on Guillén's affirmation of black peoples' agency in the new world and criticism of racial oppression. Chapter 6 examines Guillén's supposed "celebration" of *mestizaje* by interrogating the black masculinist perspective that dominates his depiction of the figure of the *mulata* (mixed race woman). The conclusion offers a short summary of the main contributions of the book. It is admirable that this work delves into an analysis of Guillén's essays and the prose writing of his contemporaries, as much as the poems for which Guillén is best known. The alternation between analyses of Guillén's poetry and prose is particularly pleasant, as it lends the book a sense of variety that is often difficult to cultivate in works that focus on the oeuvre of a single author.

From the outset, it is clear that the book is very thoroughly researched, and that Arnedo-Gómez's argument is firmly established within a suitable theoretical

context. The author rightly identifies a void in existing scholarship on Guillén: namely, that previous discussions of Guillén’s work as an assertion of Cuban blackness against homogenizing discourses of *mestizaje* tend to “apply a preconceived idea of blackness not developed in relation to Latin American contexts” (xxii). However, despite its strong engagement with other critical studies of Guillén, the introduction also hints at some of the principal areas of weakness in this text. Near the end of the introduction, Arnedo-Gómez commences a lengthy critique of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, a book that has already garnered substantial critical reception (enough to fill an edited volume), most notably the skeptical review by Joan Dayan, which Arnedo-Gómez cites during his own critique. Although Arnedo-Gómez makes several valid observations here, this lengthy examination of other scholarship does little to bolster the reader’s understanding of his own text and even diverts the natural progression of the introduction. Similarly, there are moments where Arnedo-Gómez’s engagement with other scholarship on Guillén veers from the productively critical towards the dismissive, particularly towards works that examine the relationship between Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes. Stylistically, this approach lends itself to a citation-heavy prose that impedes a fluid reading and at times makes it difficult to discern Arnedo-Gómez’s authorial voice, particularly in the introduction and chapter 1. With that said, Arnedo-Gómez’s diligence in establishing the critical void in which to intervene is in many ways understandable, given the very robust body of existing scholarship on Guillén.

Overall, this book offers a very original perspective on Guillén’s work but seems to be written almost exclusively for scholars of Guillén. With that said, I would certainly recommend this book for specialists. Arnedo-Gómez is clearly an expert on the topic and his desire to fill an apparent void in the scholarship on the poet is commendable. Less specialized readers may requisite greater historical and social contextual development with the same careful attention that Arnedo-Gómez gives to his study of existing scholarship on Guillén. Some structural elements and relative scarcity of background information make this book a challenging read for non-specialists and those entering the field with less robust knowledge of Guillén and the critical scholarship on his life, prose, and poetry. In general, this book is well suited to specialists at the doctoral and faculty levels interested in blackness, Afro-Cuban cultural production, and *mestizaje* in Guillén’s poetry.

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