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Tinker Report

Concrete Currents: The Poetic and Political Projects of Nicolás Guillén in Cuba and Brazil

Across the varying degrees of concrete praxis, material and semantic experimentation remain constant with persistent attention to geometric spacing, syntactical innovation, lexical hybridity, and transmedial exploration.¹ Rooted in the graphic and cognitive innovation of geometric abstraction, concrete aesthetics become fluid vehicles of visuality, sonority, and materiality, forming co-constitutive layers of artistic practice and knowledge production. I noticed these characteristics in Nicolás Guillén's first publication of poems, *Motivos de son* in 1930, with his intermedial praxis preceding Brazilian concrete poetry, also known for its experimentation with lyric, sound, and image. These initial stages of analysis propelled my archival work in 2024 and this past summer with the support of the Tinker Field Research Grant through the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Throughout this past year of research, relationships between Cuba, Brazil, and concretude have become more defined by retracing Guillén's exchanges in Brazil.

Intertwining people, places, and phases, this work would not be possible without the ongoing support from international and local institutions across Cuba, Brazil, and the U.S., or without the remarkable mentorship from current advisors at UC Berkeley and former professors in the earlier days of my academic career. In addition to the exceptional specialists and colleagues I have been grateful to work with, my family and friends are quintessential to these processes at home and abroad. This project is not only tied to continuity and flux but rooted in relationships and empathy among beings, geographies, and narratives. Pursuing archival research is riddled with complicated factors regarding the positionality of the researcher and the examination of materials, voices, and experiences of others, which is why an ethics of care and connection must ground these encounters.

This summer, I began at the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística in Centro Habana with a team of experts on Guillén's archive. I sifted through volumes of correspondences between Guillén and critical Brazilian figures such as Cândido Portinari and Jorge Amado, and his countless invitations from organizations like Associação Brasileira de Escritores. These intellectuals communicated internationally beyond Cuba and Brazil and sometimes throughout South America, Europe, or the United States regarding intersectional concerns about the personal or familial well-being of one another, political happenings locally and transnationally, and professional and creative triumphs with new works, collections, and authors. In every letter, there was always a tribute to family members, a specific detail or memory outlined, encouragement to send recent works, news of translations or publications, contacts to reach out

¹ Definitions and genealogies of concrete aesthetics reveal a porosity of temporal, geographic, and material iterations. For additional information, please see the pioneering projects of Rachel Price, Rebecca Kosick, Kurt Beals, Charles Perrone, and Nathaniel Wolfson.

to, and/or requests to organize the next trip to see one another. Their correspondences demonstrate a persistent network of intellectual and professional solidarity as well as personal admiration and affection. Guillén's centrality in the expansion of intellectual community between Cuba and Brazil stresses the integral role of Afro-diasporic thinkers and critical interventions of race in the formation of these artistic and sociopolitical movements.



Fig. 1. Photos of Nicolás Guillén and Jorge Amado in Rio de Janeiro in 1948. Courtesy of the Fundación Nicolás Guillén, located in the headquarters of UNEAC in Vedado, La Habana, Cuba.

A warm and special thanks to the grandson of Guillén, Nicolasito Hernández Guillén, and directors Martina, Orlando, and África for facilitating my time at the foundation and helping me with my project.

My time at the Fundación Nicolás Guillén verified entanglements of ethnographic, literary, and artistic channels, and the closeness of intellectuals like Portinari, Amado, and Guillén. When reviewing the 1936 to 1939 editions of *Mediodía*, a newspaper directed by Guillén in Havana, the transnational resonances of his political and poetic projects appear more explicitly as he turns to literature, art, and culture to anchor a transatlantic solidarity amidst the growing global preoccupation of war and fascism. Arriving later to Camagüey, I was met with an incredible team at the Casa Natal de Nicolás Guillén. They gave me a plethora of books and digital archives including Guillén's recordings of his own poetry and welcomed me to the international symposium, "Los días de Guillén" held in his hometown annually as an homage to his life and work. The combination of reading handwritten and typed letters, holding saved polaroids, speaking with family members, navigating the streets of Camagüey, and visiting Guillén's home resulted in multisensorial research based on lived experiences, human connection, and a variety of material histories.



Fig. 2. Photo taken by me in July of 2025 of the Nicolás Guillén statue located near La Iglesia de La Merced in Camagüey featuring a portion of his original poem, *Elegía camagüeyana*.

Once in Brazil, my first stop was in São Paulo, where I split the majority of my time between the Fundação Bienal and Pinacoteca. In both institutions, their collections of cultural criticism from the mid-twentieth century reaffirm affinities between Cuba and Brazil and their political and aesthetic concerns. Particularly in Pinacoteca's archive, the affiliations between Guillén and Portinari were reinforced as I came across a tribute to the life and civic duty of Portinari where Guillén, accompanied by a small poem, is cited for knowing his spirit and achievements: "Para Cândido Portinari: "O mel e o rum, uma guitarra bem doce, uma canção, um coração" (see Fig. 3. Guillén and Farias, "Portinari"). Although it was important to build on my understanding of Portinari's trajectory, I also examined several works by Afro-Brazilian artists such as Rubem Valentim, Abdias do Nascimento, and Emanuel Araújo to provide contrast and continuity within Afro-diasporic legacies of art practice. Both Valentim and Nascimento have outwardly dissociated their work from the concrete art movement despite the geometric abstraction and semantic plurality of their praxes. This hybridity reflects material and semantic fluxes tied to art practice, representation, spirituality, and subjectivity. As such, these associations and distinctions reiterate the fluidity of concrete experimentation that transcends binary parameters, timelines, and genres.

These complexities resurfaced throughout my time at the Fundação Pierre Verger in Salvador, Bahia. This space is integrated with the home of the French ethnographer, Pierre Verger, who moved to Brazil in the 1940s and had an internationally recognized career devoted to studies of Afro-Brazilian religiosity and culture. Located in the neighborhood of Brotas, the institution is made up of an eclectic team of professionals who work vigorously to assemble the archives and organize creative expositions to interact with the life and works of Pierre Verger.



Fig. 3. Photo 42415 taken by Pierre Verger of La Iglesia de la Soledad in 1957 in Camagüey, Cuba. Courtesy of Fundação Pierre Verger in Salvador, Brazil.



Fig. 4. Photo taken by me on the corner of La Iglesia de la Soledad in July of 2025 in Camagüey, Cuba.

Further threading the intellectual fabrics between Cuba and Brazil in this time period, Guillén and Verger met during the poet's trip to Bahia in the 1940s and maintained close contact into the 1950s. Verger's first trip to Cuba was to Havana in the 1930s, whereas his second excursion in 1957 began in Guillén's hometown, Camagüey and incorporated cities from the eastern tip to the western provinces. In his second trip to Cuba, Verger photographed everything from close-ups to panoramic shots of people, landscapes, architecture, nature, and construction projects across the island in a period of fervent modernization and hegemonic expansion of the United States. Verger's collection from 1957 fixates on industrial development, including markets, waterways, and highways that document the flows of commerce, people, and machines. He places nature and industry, human and merchandise, participant and observer in constant contrast and harmony.



Fig. 5. Photo 43882 taken by Pierre Verger in 1957 during his second visit to Cuba. Courtesy of Fundação Pierre Verger in Salvador, Brazil.

Concluding my time in Brazil, I had the opportunity to work closely with the Academia Brasileira das Letras (ABL) and the Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Afro-Brasileiros (IPEAFRO) in Rio de Janeiro. With ABL, I reviewed the logistical paperwork and planning of Nicolás Guillén's first visit to Brazil for a conference in November of 1947. In his speech, Guillén retraces Afro-Cuban authorship and problematizes representations of Blackness in international movements of negritude, while also placing these sociocultural and political movements in tandem with important Brazilian writers and literary histories. With the experienced researchers at IPEAFRO, I was given access to an extensive archive of Abdias Nascimento and O Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN). The manuscripts of performances compared with the portrayals of the group across newspapers uncovered tensions within the media and accentuated the pioneering forces of Abdias and TEN across artistic and intellectual spheres in Brazil.

Although it is nearly impossible to compare being present in these spaces of cultural, linguistic, and historic importance, archival work lives beyond institutions and borders and throughout relationships. With digital realms becoming more popular every day, researchers must reflect on what it means to have an archive in flight, whether in flash drives, phones, or laptop libraries, and to treat these reproductions with care. We must take part in a collective effort of recognition to avoid any further harm in an already complicated encounter. As indispensable to my research process, I am very grateful for these experiences and excited to continue working with individuals and institutions cross-culturally.