



small axe a caribbean journal of criticism

But I Remain: An Interview with Nancy Morejón

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Translated from the Spanish by J. Bret Maney

This interview was originally conceived of as an in-person conversation and a way of incorporating Nancy Morejón's voice into this special section, edited by Antonio López, on *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén* (Nation and *mestizaje* in Nicolás Guillén), Morejón's work of literary criticism published in 1982.¹ The interview represents an opportunity to explore in greater depth some of the interesting issues raised by the generative essays published here by Devyn Spence Benson, Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, and Aisha Z. Cort. The idea of a face-to-face conversation turned out to be impossible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This exchange occurred in the much less desirable form of a dialogue conducted over email. Even so, it is wonderful to "listen" to Morejón reflect on her early work, her involvement with Ediciones El Puente, her hiatus from publishing poetry between 1967 and 1979, and her participation in the public intellectual life of Havana through her critical work on Nicolás Guillén.

As this special section affirms, Morejón has been recognized as one of the most celebrated and revered writers and intellectuals of the Cuban revolutionary period and one of the most important Caribbean women writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She has published more than fifteen collections of poetry and numerous essays. A careful reader and translator of francophone Caribbean writers and intellectuals of the twentieth century, Morejón has translated into Spanish the works of Aimé Césaire, Jacques Roumain, and Édouard Glissant, among others. From 1986 to 1993, and again from 2000 to 2006, she served as director of the Center for Caribbean Studies based at Cuba's premier cultural institution, Casa de las Américas. Her experiences and her fluency in the languages of the region have endowed her with a profound and rich voice that has helped shape our understanding of the Caribbean as a field of study.

Vanessa Pérez-Rosario: Where were you born? What was your neighborhood like where you grew up?

Nancy Morejón: I was born in Maternidad Obrera Hospital in Marianao. Because I was born one month early, they put me in an incubator. More than a week later, my mother and I returned to the annex of 51 Peñalver Street near the corner of Manrique, next to a barber shop. I lived there with my parents, Angélica Hernández and Felipe Morejón, until around the end of January 1986, when I moved to an apartment in an eighteen-story building in Alamar, at the entrance to the so-called Blue Circuit, which includes the beaches of Cojímar, Bacuranao, Boca Ciega, Santa María, and Guanabo. It was a very working-class neighborhood, made up of laborers and people of limited means. It's called Los Sitios and is one of the core spaces of Havana's identity. Much of the popular dance music on the island is permeated by the neighborhood's character.

¹ Nancy Morejón, *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén* (Havana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1982).

VPR: You began to write poetry at a very young age. How old were you when you started writing? Did you grow up in a literary family?

NM: I didn't know what it meant to write, that is to say, I was unaware of what the literary profession was like. But yes. At a very young age, at nine, the need to express everything going on about me began. I got hold of a school notebook and started filling it with notes about everything I found I was unable to share with my parents. There I kept secrets, innocent and otherwise. In that notebook, my first poems emerged, which I only discovered, in early 1959, thanks to the observations of Elena López, a teacher at the Institute of Secondary Education of Havana, who had asked me to make an oral presentation on "The Cave of Polyphemus" from book 9 of Homer's *Odyssey*.

VPR: How old were you when the revolution triumphed in 1959? Do you remember that day? What did that moment mean for you? What did it mean for your family?

NM: I was just fourteen years old. I remember that day because the night before, I saw my father leaving with a gun in his hand to take the Fifth Police Precinct, where a torturer and murderer, Esteban Ventura Novo, presided. Batista had fled with his family, in secret, accompanied only by the then head of the army, whose last name was Tabernilla.

It was impressive. I couldn't imagine all the changes that were going to take place in the country.

For my family it meant achieving a real, tangible position in the social and political life of Cuba, which Fidel's bearded revolutionaries [*los barbudos*] made possible. Those transformations opened the doors of the university to me, something that would have been impossible, given the slender means of my parents.

In August, I turned fifteen, which was celebrated in the style of the time. The birthday girl danced a waltz with her father, accompanied by fourteen other couples. Then, when the waltz was over, my cousin Fernandito—whom I've never heard from again—took my hand; we went to the center of the room and danced, as was usual, a *danzón* by Antonio María Romeu.

VPR: At seventeen you published your first poetry collection, *Mutismos* (1962), two years later you published *Amor, ciudad atribuida* (1964), and shortly afterward, *Richard trajo su flauta y otros argumentos* (1967). Then you didn't publish another poetry collection for twelve years, until *Parajes de una época* (1979).² What were you up to during those twelve years?

NM: Writing. I never stopped writing, but I threw myself mainly into literary research, and I began to study the work of Nicolás Guillén in a systematic way. However, those twelve years were years in which it wasn't possible for me to publish poetry, owing to a period of uncertainty stemming from incidents that were unleashed in connection with the Padilla Affair. The real reasons remain a mystery to me I have not tried to unravel. They are part of what is known as the five-year period some call the Gray Period [*quinquenio gris*]; others, black. During that time, I also wrote in the *testimonio* genre and published, in 1971, with a historian colleague, an innovative text called *Lengua de pájaro*, which was the result of a residency in northern Holguín, in a small mining town on the coast called Nicaro.³ It was, in fact, the local history of the nickel industry.

² Nancy Morejón, *Mutismos* (Havana: El Puente, 1962), *Amor, ciudad atribuida* (Havana: El Puente, 1964), *Richard trajo su flauta y otros argumentos* (Havana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1967), and *Parajes de una época* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1979).

³ Nancy Morejón, with Carmen Goncè, *Lengua de pájaro: Comentarios reales* (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1971).

VPR: The El Puente group published your first two poetry collections. Can you describe the group? What were their activities? Did they have a particular intellectual focus?

NM: That's right. They were trying to publish books, and, thanks to the ingenuity of Ana María Simo, for example, the magazine named *El Resumen* was created.⁴ They were a group of young writers who were trying to open up a space for themselves when faced with publications still in the hands of the older generations. I joined the publishing group later on. There was no defined program. Nor did the group of friends declare themselves a literary group. El Puente's brief publishing catalog ranges from its founder, José Mario Rodríguez, to the playwrights José Ramón Brene—who was the oldest—and Nicolasito Dorr, while also including the poet Georgina Herrera. Except for her, they have all died during different periods.

VPR: You majored in French at the University of Havana. Why French?

NM: Because I had failed French in year five—the last—of the Baccalaureate conceived of by the famous Varona Plan. In the first semester, I received a grade of forty-five out of one hundred. In the second semester, thirty-three out of one hundred. So I had to attend make-up exams to be able to graduate and enter university. The committee, which gave me one hundred, was made up of Dr. Chauchat and Dr. Hortensia Lamar; they were surprised by my rapid progress in the language. This circumstance led me, in 1962, to choose to enroll in the School of Arts and Letters at the University of Havana, in the bachelor's degree program in French Language and Literature. For my undergraduate thesis on the great Martinican Aimé Césaire, I had Dr. Graziella Pogolotti as my adviser.

VPR: You wrote your thesis on Aimé Césaire and focused on *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.⁵ What was it that initially attracted you to Césaire's work? *Cahier* is a book-length poem that Césaire wrote about his experience of returning to Martinique, his native country, after having been abroad for many years. At the time, you had yet to leave Cuba. What was it about that text that fired your imagination, or the imagination of the young university student Nancy?

NM: First of all, I should repeat the words that one of the founders of surrealism, Benjamin Péret, uttered when he discovered it during a visit to Martinique in 1942: “[Aimé Césaire is] the only great poet writing in French who has appeared in the last twenty years.”⁶ And, I would add, in the twentieth century. André Breton commented that Césaire is “a great black poet” and “a black [poet] who wields the French language today as no one else does.”⁷ *Cahier* is a fountain, an extraordinary source of condemnation of colonial structures and fascism, and, above all, an analysis of the relations between Europe and all the archipelagos of the Antilles, Greater and Lesser. Those verses inspired his universally renowned compatriots, such as Édouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon. To the latter we owe the notion of the third

⁴ Ana María Simo (1943–) is a Cuban playwright, journalist, and writer. Her first and only book of short stories, *Las fábulas*, was published by the literary group and press Ediciones El Puente (1961–65), which she co-directed with José Mario Rodríguez. She emigrated initially to Paris and then, in the mid-1970s, settled in New York, where she was associated with the theatrical workshop of María Irene Fornés.

⁵ Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, which first appeared in the Parisian magazine *Volontés* in 1939, was first published in book form in Spanish translation as *Retorno al país natal* in 1943. Later editions in Spanish used the title *Cuaderno de un retorno al país natal*.

⁶ “[Aimé Césaire es] el único gran poeta de lengua francesa que ha aparecido en veinte años”; Benjamin Péret, preface to Aimé Césaire, *Retorno al país natal*, trans. Lydia Cabrera, illus. Wifredo Lam (Havana: Molina, 1943), n.p.

⁷ “Un grand poète noir”; “un Noir qui manie la langue française comme il n'est pas aujourd'hui un Blanc pour la manier” (“a Black who wields the French language as no White can today”); André Breton, “Un grand poète noir,” preface to Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1947; reprint, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983), xii (Morejón's paraphrasing).

world, so popular today. The first foreign edition of *Cahier* was produced on the island of Cuba, translated by the anthropologist Lydia Cabrera and illustrated by the wonderful painter Wifredo Lam. I acquired a copy of the edition by walking under the arcades of Reina Street to Canelo Bookstore, where I bought it for a few cents. Later, in January 1968, in connection with the celebration of the first Cultural Congress of Havana, Rogelio Martínez Furé, Sara Gómez, and I met with a group of dignitaries invited to the event, chief among whom were C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Michel Leiris, and Med Hondo. It took place outside El Carmelo restaurant, on Calzada Street, opposite the Amadeo Roldán Theater.

VPR: What was your relationship with Césaire? Did you know him?

NM: None, until I made the discovery of the copy of his book that I bought at Canelo Bookstore in central Havana, located near our only Gothic church, El Sagrado Corazón. At the meeting at El Carmelo, I began by telling him that I was writing my thesis on him. He was surprised but flattered. Then, many years later, around 1990, we ran into one another in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, where I was attending the launch of the Carbet Caribbean Prize, whose jury I joined as a permanent member from its inception. Patrick Chamoiseau would win that year for his novella *Antan d'enfance*, published by the Gallimard publishing house in Paris, which would lead, afterwards, to books of his as impressive as *Chronique des sept misères*. By then, readers were also discovering the works of two Haitian women writers, Marie Chauvet and Marie-Célie Agnant, both of whom are, for their own periods, of enormous importance for understanding women's writing of the last century. Later on, the emergence of a literature written in Creole, of great merit, would become the central topic of debates.

VPR: Some might say that Césaire's ideas of *négritude* contrast with the ideology of *mestizaje* in your work *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén*. Can the ideologies of Césaire's *négritude* be reconciled with *mestizaje* or the transculturation of Fernando Ortiz?

NM: The word *négritude* was born precisely within the text of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. It was the first time that it was used. Later came the outstanding works of the Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas and the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor. It was the exceptional Belgian researcher Lilyan Kesteloot—whom, by the way, I met in Paris at some point during the first decade of the twenty-first century, at an event organized by the publisher Présence Africaine—who plotted the coordinates of the movement called Negritude. It is nothing other than a literary movement that, in the case of Senghor, was also a tool of a political nature. Negritude was born in the years after the birth of what we know in Latin America as *negrismo*. On 20 April 1930, Nicolás Guillén's famous *Motivos de son*, which would stand as the most brilliant banner of *negrismo*, appeared in the *Diario de la Marina*, in Havana. Guillén, many decades later, published an article in the Madrid newspaper *ABC* titled "Negrismo y negritud." To understand these two movements, or schools, it's important to examine the letter that Guillén received in 1932 from Miguel de Unamuno. In it, Unamuno declares that he knows Guillén's name thanks to Federico García Lorca and argues, in precociously modern fashion, for the phenomenon of *mestizaje* and the value of language as a definitive vehicle of culture. In other words, in both cases, Breton and Unamuno baptized authentic, transparently anticolonial, independent poetic expressions that became emblems of the twentieth century. Guillén's verse, clear and direct, possessed innumerable facets for resolutely denouncing the most subtle or glaring manifestations of racial prejudice in this hemisphere, having been the authentic voice of the Cuban people. Nicolás Guillén's poetry does not belong only to Cuba but to the Antilles, to the Caribbean, and to the rest of Latin America, since he well

knew how to exalt the image of the Afro-Hispanic national soul, creating a poetics from an authentic foundation, out of the green and blue of the Antilles, the guitar, the palm tree, the hardwood of the countryside, the lizard, the rose bush, the little paper bird.

VPR: In the 1960s, in Havana, there were study groups on racial issues that met regularly. These seem like important moments of racial awareness in Cuba. Can you talk about these groups? What did they read? How were they organized?

NM: Always groups in the avant-garde, in the rearguard. What we knew as the Cuban avant-garde appeared in the pages of *Revista de Avance*.⁸ The most brilliant historians always took into account the Cuban racial question, consciousness of which attained varying levels. Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, the historian who founded the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana, was a champion of these matters. But they weren't groups. They were, let's say, vital forces in society that lifted up their voices against oppression joined to one of its most sinister creatures: the practice of racial discrimination, a lever that always heightens racial prejudice. Both creatures make up racism.

I know for a fact that Juan Gualberto Gómez—a patriot and journalist and José Martí's right-hand man for organizing the 1895 War of Independence—whom I came to investigate through my work on Nicolás Guillén's writing and social action, was venerated by circles within Havana's famous Club Atenas. There, he was received, he was lauded, and his ideas were cheered. The ideals of a republic were making themselves felt. Those young people wanted to achieve it with all their hearts. The newspaper *La Fraternidad*, founded by Don Juan, was a seed, a space conducive to Cuban *independentistas* despite their marked differences of class and background. The airport serving Varadero Beach, in Matanzas, bears his name.

The 1960s saw the work of, for example, Walterio Carbonell, among others. Later, these social forces became part of a transformative process, and cultural centers, especially in the performing arts, such as the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional [Cuban National Folkloric Ensemble] and the Compañía de Danza Contemporánea [Contemporary Dance Company], were created, which highlighted in their repertoires, with genius and dedication, the African component of our identity.

VPR: In 1972 you published *Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén* [A compilation of texts about Nicolás Guillén] and then in 1982, *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén*. Both books were well received, and the latter is the focus of the special section being published in *Small Axe*. What was the impetus for writing these books?

NM: As a matter of fact, one day at noon, the writers Mario Benedetti (Uruguay) and Roberto Fernández Retamar (Cuba) summoned me to Casa de las Américas to commission me to prepare a volume of essays that would bring together the best of the secondary literature on Nicolás Guillén. The volume was to be published in 1972 by the publishing arm of Casa de las Américas, in its prestigious Valoración Múltiple series, to mark the occasion, that year, of Nicolás Guillén's seventieth birthday. I made the selection of the texts; I created a collage of the best interviews given by Guillén to the press and to numerous specialized periodical publications. In addition, I wrote a foreword to contextualize the production of the author of *La paloma de vuelo popular* (1958) in its Caribbean, Latin American, and Cuban settings. All my work was supervised by Mario, who had founded Casa's Research Center; by Trinidad Pérez Valdés, a great colleague; and by Roberto himself, whose beautiful text "El son de vuelo popular" I included.⁹ It was hard work for almost two years. The Valoración Múltiple edition

⁸ A magazine published between 1927 and 1930, *Revista de Avance* aimed to legitimize and promote the initial development of the avant-garde on the island.

⁹ Roberto Fernández Retamar, *El son de vuelo popular: Sobre Nicolás Guillén* (Havana: Instituto Cubano de Libro, 1972).

was published in 1972. I continued my research, and, ten years later, in 1982, I published *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén*, its indisputable companion volume. The latter received several awards, including, while still in manuscript form, the Enrique José Varona National Essay Prize (1980) from the UNEAC [National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba] and, in 1983, a year after it was published in book form, the Mirta Aguirre Prize, named for the major Cervantes scholar of the continent, Cuba, and the Hispanic Caribbean. I should add that various editions of the Valoración Múltiple collection are in existence, and I should highlight the Chilean edition from Mosquito Editores (1994). Likewise, the edition published in Paris, in 2012, by Présence Africaine, a leading publisher on these issues that entrusted the translation to the Senegalese specialist Ndèye Anna Gaye, also made a considerable academic impact. This French edition reproduces the book's original pages devoted to the topic, precisely, of the racial question.

VPR: What was your relationship with Nicolás Guillén like? Can you describe it?

NM: Very affectionate and very close, despite our difference in age. We were very good friends. In both our personal and professional conversations, I think that a mutual respect and an indefinable affection always came first; we shared a love of books, antiques, and also sports. There was no Havana afternoon on which he did not remember the boxer Kid Chocolate and Capablanca, the champion chess player. To both, he dedicated beautiful verses: to the former, his splendid “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano” [“Brief Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer”] (*Sóngoro cosongo*, 1931); to the latter, “Deportes” [“Sports”] (*La paloma de vuelo popular*, 1958). At the end of a good reading, or a dull meeting, Nicolás Guillén would get up from his chair and go look, on a nearby bookshelf, for a memento that was none other than a top that he spun on the ground like a child.

VPR: You’ve said that “the Caribbean world is a Tower of Babel.” Your commitment to learning French and English in the 1960s speaks to your engagement to know the Caribbean. Can you talk about the enduring place of multilingualism and translation in Caribbean studies?

NM: They are vital. If we recognize cultural diversity as an element intrinsic to our nature, it is important for our future development to impress upon students the necessity of learning a foreign language so that reading becomes a daily habit. We live in a region where many languages are spoken, both major metropolitan languages and others. The creoles have given birth to an emerging literature. How can one deny it? As Glissant said: I speak and write in the presence of many languages. I must struggle to recognize them, speaking them, respecting them all, because doing so is the best way to keep them from disappearing in my midst.¹⁰

Preferred citation:

Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, “But I Remain: An Interview with Nancy Morejón,” trans. J. Bret Maney, http://smallaxe.net/sites/small-axe/files/2022-10/Morejón_interview_English%20Translation_3.pdf; originally published as “Mas yo resto: Entrevista con Nancy Morejón,” *Small Axe*, no. 65 (July 2021): 142–50.

If citing a quote, the page number should be placed after the URL, separated by a comma.

¹⁰ See Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 39–40.