

Insularismo, Negrismo, and the Revision of Cubanidad in Virgilio Piñera's La isla en peso

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In the Cuban literary landscape of the twentieth century, the polemical and irreverent Virgilio Piñera stands out for his refusal to conform to the dominant literary movements and for his innovations in theater, short story, and poetry. The controversy that the author stimulated had devastating effects in both personal and literary realms; the censorship of his work in Cuba in 1971, accusations of moral violations and contra-revolutionary activity, and his isolation from the Cuban literary community until his death; kept the majority of the prolific writer's texts largely unpublished, unknown, and understudied (Anderson). Since the 1980s, interest in Piñera's work has emerged and in recent years several important books have been published on the author, both in and outside of Cuba, including *Everything in Its Place* (2006), by Thomas Anderson; the compilation *Virgilio Piñera: La memoria del cuerpo* (2002), edited by Reinaldo Arenas; and *La poesía de Virgilio Piñera: ensayo de aproximación* (2001), by Enrique Saíenz. Much work remains to be done regarding all aspects of his literary career, but what I hope to accomplish in this article is to situate one of Piñera's most controversial poems, "La isla en peso," within the literary tendencies of its era in order to demonstrate that Piñera, always cognizant of the work of his contemporaries, consciously inserts himself into the discussion of *cubanidad*. I do not believe that Piñera's poem is merely a negative or pessimistic view of island life, nor do I think that it is just the personal expression of an anguished artist; but rather I consider the poem an appropriation and reconfiguration of the visions of *cubanidad* that appear in Nicolás Guillén's *poesía negrista* and José Lezama Lima's *insularismo* that redefine the parameters of *lo cubano*.

One of the main preoccupations of Cuban writers during the first half of the twentieth century was to discover and uncover the fundamentals of *cubanidad*. Cuba's liberation from Spanish colonial power and subsequent control by North American capitalism left many residents of the island questioning what constituted an independent Cuban identity. One of the first significant literary movements of the twentieth century that attempted to capture *cubanidad* was the *negrismo*, or *poesía negrista*, movement; a poetic tendency popular throughout the Caribbean that incorporated Afro-Antillean musical rhythm and language into written poetry. During the late 1920s and 1930s

Nicolás Guillén became the main exponent of *poesía negrista* within Cuba. Inspired by the anthropological studies of Fernando Ortiz, Guillén turned towards the Afro-Cuban population as a source for the essence of *cubanidad*. Guillén used the folklore, music, and customs of indigenous and *mestizo* Cubans to create a social poetry that, among many things, criticized colonial and imperial power and sought an independent Cuban identity. Robert Márquez notes in his essay “Introducción a Guillén,” how Guillén’s popular poetry was an expression of unique national traits: “En propiedad, Guillén es el poeta de un pueblo, y su principal afán ha sido la creación de una poesía con una inconfundible impronta cubana que reflejara—y ayudara a consolidar—la identidad nacional” (128). Guillén’s *poesía negrista* was hugely popular, and Cuban writers during the twenties, thirties, and forties had to confront its dominance on the country’s literary map. The formation of the literary journal *Orígenes*, in 1944, brought together a group of writers, including José Lezama Lima, Cintio Vitier, and Virgilio Piñera, who, like Guillén, saw poetry as the means for expressing *cubanidad*. While some of these writers, such as Lezama and Vitier, attempted to distance themselves from the *negrista* movement in the search for what they labeled a purer form of poetic expression, an expression not based on racial identity, Piñera assimilated both the *negrista* movement and Lezama’s insular teleology to produce the anguished and disturbing description of *cubanidad* found in his most accomplished poem, “La isla en peso.”

Lezama first confronted the topic of *cubanidad* in June of 1937, with the publication of “Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez,” in which he proposes the concept of *insularidad*. Lezama uses the double entendre of the Spanish word *insular*, which means both islander and insular, to relate the geography of the country with its cultural sensibility. Lezama’s insularism therefore refers to both the particularity of the island and the internal examination that he finds necessary for the exposure of true *cubanidad*. Lezama positions the “mito de insularidad” by comparing the “culturas de tierra adentro” and the “culturas del litoral,” to which the first belongs the “sensibilidad continental” and the second the “sensibilidad insular” (48-50). While Lezama hesitates to define insularism, he compares the sensibilities of Mexico (continental) and Cuba (insular):

La estabilidad y la reserva de una sensibilidad continental contrastan con la búsqueda superficial ofrecida por nuestra sensibilidad insular. El mexicano es fino y discreto, ama la palabra larga y con sordina; nosotros excesivos y falsamente expresivos, ofrecemos nuestra tragedia en ‘comino de chiste criollo’, como ha dicho la Mistral. (50)

As Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé points out in his book *El primitivo implorante*, Lezama’s proposal of insularism is largely a repudiation of “la sensibilidad negra” found in Guillén’s poetry. As Lezama writes, *poesía negrista* is the result of an abrupt and superficial exploration of insular sensibility: “La reserva con que la poesía mexicana, tan aristocrática, acogió al indio, como motivo épico o lírico, contra el gran ejemplo de su pintura, contrasta con la brusquedad con que la poesía cubana planteó de una manera quizá desmedida, la incorporación de la

sensibilidad negra” (50). According to Cruz-Malavé, Lezama positions his topic of insularism as the positive aspect of Cuban expression while associating the *negrista* expression with the negative aspects of *cubanidad*:

Conforme el ‘insularismo’ se convierte en el modo “legítimo” de lo cubano y la ‘sensibilidad negra’ en su modo ‘ilegítimo,’ se suman a esta oposición otras que la refuerzan. La distinción entre la percusión como elemento de la ‘superficie’ y la armonía como elemento de “profundidad,” invalida la “sensibilidad negra” en la medida en que ella es ‘percusiva,’ en que su hallazgo principal ha sido, según Lezama, ‘la incorporación de vocablo onomatopéyico,’ o la jitanjáfora. (38)

Lezama’s critique of *poesía negrista* is not limited to its superficiality, but rather its inherent impurity. Lezama defines poetry as, “lo único que siempre sigue respondiendo preguntas que son, contestadas por ellas, la suprema adivinación de la vida íntima de los elementos, el fuego, el aire, la tierra” (55). In reference to *mestizo* poetry, he then simply states, “Sangre: impureza. Agua y fuego: espíritus puros” (Lezama Lima 57). Lezama makes a statement that Vitier will later echo in *Lo cubano en la poesía*: if poetry is to reflect *cubanidad* it can not be tainted by racial or blood identities, rather it must reflect an entity or identity that exists beyond these classifications. For Lezama, poetry based on blood is impure: “la sangre, líquido impuro en el supuesto de estar formado por mezclillas de agua y fuego, produce una poesía inexacta, de inservible impureza,” while what poetry should reflect is the spirit: “[l]a poesía está definitivamente del lado del espíritu” (Lezama Lima 56-57). The insularism that Lezama proposes therefore assumes a purer form of poetic expression, an expression not tainted by its excessiveness or falsity, as he labels the *poesía negrista*, but a poetry centered on the spirit. As Cruz-Malavé suggests, both Lezama and Vitier saw insularism as a poetic system that centralized Cuban expression to afford more profound exploration of the spirit of the island:

Lezama propone este “mito de insularismo;” un sistema poético total cuyo objeto es convertir la marginación de lo contemporáneo y de lo americano en centro trascendental, en origen de posibilidades infinitas. Centrar la isla de Cuba y centrar su devenir histórico desarraigado, como propone Vitier en *Lo cubano*; volver a la “imagen” paradisíaca de la isla, es ésa la meta del “mito de insularismo” en el “Coloquio [con Juan Ramón Jiménez].” (34)

In Vitier’s book, *Lo cubano en la poesía*, published for the first time in 1958, he defines *poesía negrista* as a literary movement that, within a teleological perception of poetry, marked a specific moment in Cuban literature that the poets of *Orígenes* had superseded. For Vitier, Guillén’s poetry that sought to find Cuba’s *carácter*, found in the country’s popular arts and customs, was a step in the direction of uncovering the ultimate Cuban identity:

La poesía va iluminando al país. Lo cubano se revela, por ella, en grados cada vez más distintos y luminosos. Primero fue la peculiaridad de *la naturaleza* de la isla. No

olvidemos que el fondo natural es decisivo para entender las configuraciones del carácter, el sentimiento y el espíritu. Muy pronto, junto a la naturaleza aparece *el carácter*: el sabor de lo vernáculo, las costumbres, el tipicismo con todos sus peligros. Más adentro comienza a brotar el sentimiento, se empiezan a oír las voces del *alma*. Finalmente el reino del *espíritu*: del espíritu como sacrificio y como creación. (emphasis in original, 19)

In Vitier's linear concept of poetry in which each literary movement comes closer to the complete revelation of the Cuban spirit, each subsequent development holds more value for its proximity to the ultimate truth. Therefore, Vitier labels *poesía negrista* as a necessary progression that has allowed the *Orígenes* poets to explore the profundities of *cubanidad*. Vitier dedicates a chapter of *Lo cubano en la poesía* to Nicolás Guillén in which, in the closing paragraph, he praises the author for expressing, at certain moments, a *cubanidad* that is not based on racial or ethnic identity:

No estoy negando la influencia obvia del mestizaje en nuestro carácter, sino señalando que hay *otro plano*, ni blanco ni negro ni mestizo, donde el blanco, el negro y el mestizo *verifican su cubanidad*. Esta zona no racial, aunque si profundamente popular, es la que toca Guillén, no obstante sus convicciones racistas (o antirracistas, da lo mismo), en los momentos más altos de su poesía. (emphasis in original, 433)

Vitier's conviction that *cubanidad* is a quality that is not based on blood lines or ethnic heritage, but rather something that exists above that plane of identity, exemplifies the stance taken by many of the *Orígenes* authors that distanced themselves from Guillén's poetic tradition. While, for Vitier, Guillén's poetry occasionally reaches a level above racial or ethnic expression, Lezama is capable of obtaining a higher realm of expression. Vitier describes Lezama's poetry as a means to obtaining absolute knowledge: "Es la primera vez que la poesía se convierte en el vehículo de conocimiento absoluto, a través del cual se intenta llegar a las esencias de la vida, la cultura y la experiencia religiosa, penetrar poéticamente toda la realidad que seamos capaces de abarcar" (*Lo cubano* 441). Vitier argues that Lezama represents the highest expression of *cubanidad* while Piñera represents the lowest. He clearly identifies Piñera in opposition to Lezama; Lezama's poetry touches the spirit of Cuba, while Piñera's poetry is labeled *antipoesía* for its complete lack of spiritual referentiality: "Piñera podrá ostentar en todo caso el honor de haberse enfrentado, para delatarlo y ceñirlo insuperablemente, con el vacío inasible y férreo que representa para nosotros, a través de nuestra cotidiana experiencia metafísica, el demonio de la más absoluta y estéril antipoesía" ("Virgilio Piñera" 148). In *Lo cubano en la poesía*, Vitier explicitly denies that Piñera's poetry is an expression of *cubanidad* and categorically excludes the author from *lo cubano*. For Vitier, Piñera is not part of "nuestra sensibilidad," the Cuban sensibility, and therefore his expression of *cubanidad* is, in the words of Vitier, false; "Nuestra sangre, nuestra sensibilidad, nuestra historia, como hemos visto en este Curso, nos impulsan por caminos muy distintos. Considero que este testimonio de la isla está falseada" (*Lo cubano* 481). Vitier's influence in Cuban literature, together with his limited scope of what constitutes true Cuban expression, has had a direct influence on the dissemination and reception of Piñera's poetry, most notably *La isla*

en peso, as Francisco Morán illustrates in “Virgilio Piñera; la palabra terrosa, perforante”:

La identificación de la *patria* con la *poesía* va a traducirse en la construcción de un canon (el de “lo cubano”) y en una purga a partir de la cual se construye un centro (Martí) y contra el cual son juzgados todos los demás poetas cubanos. Quienes no pasen la prueba (léase la ordalía) serán expulsados (como Piñera) sin ningún miramiento de “lo cubano” y de “la poesía. (emphasis in original, 396)

Despite the fact that Piñera’s poetry does not comply with Vitier’s teleology of Cuban literature, *La isla en peso* is neither a false expression of *cubanidad* nor a mere negative or profane take on Cuban expression; it is a poem in which the author assimilates and manipulates the versions of *cubanidad* of his contemporaries to create a radical expression of Cuban identity and sensibility.

Six years after the publication of “Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez,” Piñera wrote his most enigmatic poem, “La isla en peso.” Published for the first time in 1943, the poem was a landmark piece that offered a radical new positioning on the topic of *cubanidad*. When the poem is placed in relationship with the attempts to capture and define Cuban identity by both Guillén and Lezama, it demonstrates how in his discussion of *cubanidad* Piñera refuses to rely on traditional racial or ethnic expressions and rejects the notion of insularity as a purer depiction of *cubanidad*. Throughout the poem, Piñera confronts both the Afro-Cuban culture and the insularity that Guillén and Lezama respectively placed as the centerpieces of their poetic systems. In his poetry, Piñera clearly rejects any idealized notions of Cuban culture, landscape, and art; he provides a cynical view of the nuances and vicissitudes of the island and vehemently rejects the notion of a Cuban spirit. Piñera bases *cubanidad* on the physicality of the island: the land, ocean, animals, and human beings are bodies that exist in a singular and purely physical plane.

It is not just his account of the Cuban island that separates Piñera from his contemporaries; it is also his ability to re-inscribe new meaning to the words, images, and metaphors that had steadily become a part of the Cuban poetic tradition. In *Everything in Its Place*, Thomas Anderson highlights the innovation of the poetic language of the poem:

La isla en peso is also unique among Cuban poetry of the period in terms of its intentionally shocking and aggressive language. The grotesque images, taboo subjects, and copious vulgarisms indeed offer stark contrast to the neoromantic poems of Ballagas, the so-called pure poetry of Brull, the social poems of Guillén, or the luscious, erudite verse of Lezama. (34)

The poem relates a day on the island of Cuba; from the assault of the tropical morning drizzle to the high noon sun that scalds the skin and finally, the smell of the night air that invades all corners of the island. The passage of the day reveals a vision of Cuba in which the island and all of its inhabitants are enshrouded in suffocating water, sun, and air. Anderson states that such images “serve to demystify the stereotypical image of the Antilles as a tropical paradise,” (32) but I think that the poem offers a project much larger than a simple reaction to idealizations of island life. I believe that Piñera reconfigures the elements of *cubanidad* of his contemporaries, namely Lezama and Guillén, to create a distinct concept of Cuban identity in which there is no purity, no soul or spirit

of the island, but a conglomeration of material elements that define *lo cubano*.

Vitier's classification of the poem as a false expression of *cubanidad* has been called into question, most notably by the Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas in "La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas." As Arenas suggests, Piñera's poem incorporates a multitude of Cuba's characteristics:

Comenzando por la fatalidad insular, "la maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes," retoma nuestras calamidades y tradiciones más variadas: invasiones, esclavitud, explotaciones, catequizaciones, hipocresías, concepto de pecado original, angustia esencial; la frustración de un pueblo sucesivamente castrado en sus esencias y siempre recuperándolas o, al menos, intentando hacerlo. (39)

It is important to note the proliferation of plant life, animals, customs, and language endemic to Cuba in *La isla en peso*. There is no doubt that the poem, as Arenas notes, is specifically Cuban and attempts to express a unique Cuban identity. A look at the vocabulary of the poem reveals exact natural and cultural references to the island; he refers to animals, "las cotorras," "plumas de flamencos," "espinas de pargo;" plants, "flamboión," "manglares;" food, "pitayas;" instruments, "las claves;" and cultural groups, "ñañigos," among many other Cuban particularities. But these references do not serve the function of projecting a Cuban paradise, glorifying native customs, or finding a source of pure expression. In Piñera's poetry there is no purity, no discernment for the truest expression of *cubanidad*. On his island there are objects and bodies or, in Vitier's words, "una suma de hechos" (*Lo cubano* 481).

Unlike Vitier and Lezama, Piñera did not reject the *negrismo* tradition as a superficial or outdated form of expression of *cubanidad*; rather, he reconfigures many of the images and tropes from the movement in order to express his version of Cuban sensibility. Piñera's hardly recycles the traditional elements of this poetic tendency; he re-inscribes each symbol and metaphor with a distinct and decidedly bleak meaning. The essay "Contra y por la palabra" published in 1966, allows insight into the author's concept of the literary task. For Piñera, the repetition of clichéd or common images, tropes, and metaphors, only serves to create a literature without meaning that fossilizes thought:

La palabra, como toda creación de la mente humana, alcanza su esplendor, declina y finalmente muere. Cuando muere recibe el nombre de la palabra-muerta. Podrá seguir usándose (de hecho se sigue usando), pero ya no *expresa* nada. En el vasto dominio de la literatura es alarmante el número de palabras muertas [...].

Estas palabras muertas, que nos vemos obligados a seguir usando por no disponer otras, causan la petrificación del pensamiento. A palabras muertas corresponden pensamiento muertos, y, a su vez, el pensamiento muerto *genera* un lenguaje muerto. (emphasis in original, 266)

This passage, posterior to "La isla en peso," explains Piñera's desire to reconfigure traditional poetic images in order to give them new life. He removes their common metaphorical value,

their use as dead words, and revives them, therefore generating new patterns of meaning. In “La isla en peso,” and in many other poems, Piñera utilizes traditional imagery from many literary tendencies, including the *negrista* movement, radically altering its meaning and significance. Both traditional music and dance, central themes of Guillén’s poetry, play a central role in the text as reactions to Cuban culture to the permanent physical incarceration of the island’s inhabitants. In the following passage, the *claves*, traditional Cuban instruments, communicate the feeling of claustrophobia on the island:

Nadie puede salir:
 una uva caleta cae en la frente de la criolla
 que se abanica lánguidamente en una mecedora,
 y «nadie puede salir» termina espantosamente en el choque
 de las claves. (38)

The tropical smell that descends upon the island as the night falls and replaces the sun as the oppressor also incorporates itself into the popular music and dance.

el olor entra en el baile, se aprieta contra el güiro,
 el olor sale por la boca de los instrumentos musicales,
 se posa en el pie de los bailadores,
 el coro de los presentes devora cantidades de olor
 abre la puerta y las parejas se suman a la noche (43).

Piñera also offers his own ironic twist to poetry based on musical rhythm and onomatopoeia such as Guillén’s *Motivos del son*. But Piñera reverses his role in the poetic process, he reduces words with traditional cultural meaning, typical images of *cubanidad*, to their most basic and uninflected states:

Me detengo en ciertas palabras tradicionales:
 el aguacero, la siesta, el cañaveral, el tabaco,
 con simple ademán, apenas si onomatopéyicamente,
 titánicamente paso por encima de su música,
 y digo: el agua, el mediodía, el azúcar, el humo. (37)

The poetic voice reduces the musicality of the words, therefore removing any associations with an idealization of Cuban culture. Piñera’s expression of *cubanidad* does not reject the folkloric or ethnic components of Cuban culture that were highlighted during the *negrista* movement, rather the incorporation of popular art, music, and dance in “La isla en peso,” highlights how the poet reconfigures literary symbols, many of which had become clichéd, to express his own version of Cuban sensibility.

While Lezama places his proposal of *insularismo* as a reaction to the superficiality and impurity of *poesía negrista*, in “La isla en peso,” Piñera incorporates and manipulates both concepts as his basis for *cubanidad*. “La isla en peso” has received much critical attention, but little work has been done regarding the relationship between Lezama’s theory of *insularismo* and Piñera’s

depiction of the island. I believe that in this poem Piñera adopts the topic of insularism as the basis for *cubanidad* from Lezama and redefines insular sensibility as one of continual enclosure and entrapment. Lezama clarifies that his concept of insularity is not to be understood in geographical terms but as the sensibility of insularity: “‘Insularismo’ ha de entenderse no tanto en su acepción geográfica, que desde luego no deja de interesarnos, sino, sobre todo en cuanto al problema que plantea en la historia de la cultura y aun de la sensibilidad” (47). Insularity, however, in “La isla en peso” takes on a double meaning; the geography of the island becomes an all-encompassing and inescapable force that shapes all aspects of *cubanidad*. The first and oft-quoted verses of the poem designate Cuba’s insularity as an enclosure:

La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes
me obliga a sentarme en la mesa del café.
Si no pensara que el agua me rodea como un cáncer
hubiera podido dormir a pierna suelta. (33)

Lezama’s affirmation that “el insular tiene que vivir hacia dentro,” (48) is turned into a suffocating obligation in the opening lines of Piñera’s poem. The obligation is not just poetic or intellectual, but also physical; the enclosure of the island immobilizes the poetic voice as he sits at the café table. For the poetic voice there is no rest from this physical and mental encasement; it plagues his mind even as he sleeps. In the poem, the circularity of insularity is one of its most oppressive characteristics; the geometric shape of the island increases its weight upon its inhabitants:

El horroroso paseo circular,
el tenebroso juego de los pies sobre la arena circular,
el envenado movimiento del talón que rehuye el abanico
de erizo,
los siniestros manglares, como un cinturón canceroso,
dan la vuelta a la isla,
los manglares y la fétida arena
aprietan los riñones de los moradores de la isla. (38)

Every part of the island mimics the circular shape, increasing the feeling of isolation and containment of the poetic voice. Even the island itself, labeled “la bestia” throughout the poem, is forced into a state of inaction and contemplation by the horizon and time that surround it:

Verdad es que la bestia atraviesa diariamente los cuatro
momentos caóticos
los cuatro momentos en que se la puede contemplar
—con la cabeza metida entre sus patas— escrutando
el horizonte con ojo atroz,
los cuatro momentos en que se abre el cáncer;
madrugada, mediodía, crepúsculo y noche. (39)

As the island and its citizens pass through the cycle of this day, the poetic voice reveals the

essences of this Cuba. The rising of the sun removes any cover and exposes an island that exists without history or God and that, in the end, relishes in the pure physicality of its being.

One of the most salient features of Piñera's insularity is the sun. In the poem, the sun loses all of its traditional metaphorical value; it does not represent intellectual or spiritual enlightenment, but illuminates the lack of knowledge and God on the Cuban island. As Aída Beaupied points out in her article, "Conflictos y transmutaciones en la poética antilezamista de Virgilio Piñera," the significance of light in Piñera's poetry contrasts with the role of light in Lezama's work:

En tanto que para otros escritores—Lezama incluido—la luz es símbolo de lo trascendental, para Piñera la luz es la Nada que se encarga de despojar al ser humano de todo lo que pueda darle un sentido de permanencia; es decir, despojarlo de aquello que lo distingue de los demás [...]. (276)

Light, in *La isla en peso*, brings clarity, but this clarity is not revealing of a divine or transcendental truth, but is a force that removes any cover and relentlessly exposes each human:

Pero la claridad avanzada, invade
perversamente, oblicuamente, perpendicularmente,
la claridad es una enorme ventosa que chupa la sombra,
y las manos van lentamente hacia los ojos.

Los secretos más inconfesables son dichos:
la claridad mueve las lenguas,
la claridad mueve los brazos,
la claridad se precipita sobre un frutero de guayabas,
la claridad de precipita sobre los negros y los blancos,
la claridad se golpea a sí misma,
va de uno a otro lado convulsivamente,
empieza a estallar, a reventar, a rajarse,
la claridad empieza el alumbramiento más horroroso,
la claridad empieza a parir claridad.

Son las doce del día. (41)

Each person is exposed for what he or she is: a body on an island. The light reveals no greater being or spirit, but simply the physicality of each man and woman on a piece of land. Piñera's reinterpretation of light points to the most drastic difference between his poetry and that of his contemporaries. On the island of "La isla en peso," there is not God, no divinity, no spirituality, and no salvation. For Vitier, Piñera's poetry reflects the complete absence of divinity, what he labels the *vacío*:

Lo propio del vacío, sin embargo, es no aludir a nada, sino, en última instancia, a la nada misma, pero entendida aquí no como Pecado, ni como Inefable, ni como Ser Que. No Es, sino en cuanto rigurosa categorización del vacío un mundo en que las cosas y las

criaturas están y *nada más* sobre una superficie siniestra de trivialidad, armando el espantoso y vacuo disparate que lo absorbe todo. (emphasis in original, “Virgilio Piñera” 146)

Piñera’s depiction of the Cuban island not only demonstrates a lack of religiosity, “nadie cree en Dios,” (27) but the very nature of the island makes impossible religious or spiritual acts. Perhaps one of most salient images is the wave that invades the Christian mission:

La impetuosa ola invade el extenso salón de las genuflexiones.
Nadie piensa en implorar, en dar gracias, en agradecer,
en testimoniar.

La santidad se desinfla en una carcajada. (35)

The characteristics of insularity in Piñera’s poem reduce human life to its pure materiality; instead of illuminating the spiritual, the light exposes its absolute lack while the water that surrounds the island invades even the most superficial attempt at religion. With the absence of divinity, what remains is material: “El paraíso y el infierno estallan y sólo queda la tierra” (42). While such a strident secularism had leveled criticism of triviality and pessimism, I believe that the poem, despite its many gruesome and disturbing images, depicts the lack of religiosity and spirituality as a freedom. The shift in narrative voice from the first person singular to the first person plural in the last section of the poem invokes a feeling of communion among the many bodies that inhabit the island. These bodies then take refuge in the physicality of their bodies and their island, celebrating the terrestrial and corporal qualities of their world without God:

No queremos potencias celestiales sino presencias terrestres,
que la tierra nos ampare, que nos ampare el deseo,
felizmente no llevamos el cielo en la masa de la sangre,
sólo sentimos su realidad física
por la comunicación de la lluvia al golpear nuestras cabezas. (44)

But it is not just the absence of spirit that defines the island as a purely physical place; it is also the lack of expression and reason caused by the blazing light of the sun.

The classical associations with light are inverted in the poem; the light of the sun does not bring enlightenment or reason to the island, but rather causes each person to descend into a catatonic state in which no thought or reason is possible.

En esta hora nadie sabría pronunciar el nombre más querido,
ni levantar una mano para acariciar un seno;
en esta hora del cáncer un extranjero llegado de playas remotas
preguntaría inútilmente qué proyectos tenemos
o cuántos hombres mueren de enfermedades tropicales
en esta isla. (41)

As Enrique Saíenz notes, it is the very insularity of Cuba that inhibits rational thought: “En algunos momentos se refiere Piñera al ser de la isla como una incontrolable fuerza telúrica, antítesis del pensamiento racional e incluso de toda aptitud para el conocimiento” (47). The

light of the sun reduces the inhabitants to their pure corporality; they can not speak, work, or think. The image of nature of the island impeding one's ability to think is repeated throughout the poem: "Los mangos podridos en el lecho del río ofuscan mi razón," "el trópico salta y su chorro invade mi cabeza" (36). With the loss of reason, humans lose their distinction and blend in with the other physical elements of the island: "Los hombres-conchas, los hombres-macaos, los / hombres túneles" (41). They are men without God, without reason, and also without a means of expression.

The lack of an independent Cuban artistic expression is another theme that "La isla en peso" shares with Lezama's "Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez." Lezama's preoccupation with the superficial and unauthentic expressions of Cuban identity includes what he sees as the lack of the true poetic tradition: "Hemos carecido de orgullo de expresión, nos hemos recurvado al vicio, que es elegancia en la geometría desligada de la flor, y la obra de arte no se da entre nosotros como una exigencia subterránea, sino como una frustración de la vitalidad" (61). In "La isla en peso," the light that has suffocated human reason is also at fault for the island's lack of poetic and intellectual culture: "¡Pueblo mío, tan joven, no sabes ordenar! / ¡Pueblo mío, divinamente retórico, no sabes relatar! / Como la luz o la infancia aún no tienes un rostro" (41). Folkloric ritual has been the only expression of the identity on the island; in Piñera's Cuba, philosophy and history have had no role:

Todos se ponen serios cuando el timbal abre la danza.
 Solamente el europeo leía las meditaciones cartesianas.
 El baile y la isla rodeada de agua por todas partes:
 plumas de flamencos, espinas de pargo, ramos de albahaca,
 semillas de aguacate.
 La nueva solemnidad de esta isla.
 ¡País mío, tan joven, no sabes definir!" (34)

The contrast between mind and body in this passage reinforces the corporality of human subjects in Piñera's version of *cubanidad*. Dance is the only expression of being on the island while the cultivation of the mind, the self, and knowledge has been entirely absent. The lack of thought has left the country undefined, without an identity. In both Lezama's and Piñera's versions of insularity the expression of *cubanidad* is portrayed as superficial and incomplete. Lezama's resolution to such superficiality is the re-centering of Cuban expression on *insularismo* and, for Piñera, it is the acceptance of the physical world as the one true plane of existence.

Piñera's island, removed from God, reason, and tradition, exists on a purely physical plane. What is left is the present; there is no past, no history, and no future, but simply the existing moment: "una noche esterilizada, una noche sin almas en pena, / sin memoria, sin historia, una noche antillana" (43). As I have noted, in the final stanzas of the poem, the poetic voice, together with the others that now constitute the *pueblo*, describe an acceptance of the one-dimensionality of *cubanidad* and enjoy the reality of such a state of being: "Bajo la lluvia, bajo el

olor, bajo todo lo que es una / realidad, / un pueblo se hace y se deshace dejando los testimonios” (44). The insular reality is one of enclosure, hot sun, inescapable water, and invading smell, and as those elements weigh upon the inhabitants, the union between the island and its people strengthens. As the poem ends, the island and its citizens descend into the ocean, consumed by the ocean that relentlessly surrounds them. The citizens and their island, “su bestia,” disappear in union: “siempre más abajo, hasta saber el peso de su isla, / el peso de una isla en el amor de un pueblo” (44).

Much more can be said regarding *La isla en peso* and the re-visioning of *cubanidad*, but what I hope to demonstrate is that Virgilio Piñera’s poem is not a mere expression of personal anguish from an isolated artist or a simple embittered and pessimistic view of island life, but a complex poem that enters the discussion of *cubanidad* and plays with both the primitivism movement and Lezamian insularism to create a radically distinct version of *lo cubano*. Piñera rejects any pure expression of a true Cuban identity and instead presents the reader with a secular, material, and atemporal island that, despite its faults, deserves the love its inhabitants.

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