

Mysterious Melodies:

Futurism, Primitivism, and the Onomatopoeics of *ultraísmo* and *negrismo*

David Colón

Texas Christian University

In his influential essay “Posibilidades creacionistas,” published in *Cervantes* in October of 1919, Gerardo Diego schematizes the literary concept of the *imagen*, the most vital compositional facet of the Spanish and Latin American poetic avant-gardes of the 1920s. Diego begins by identifying the various forms of the *imagen*, rhetorically explained in a method comparable to a musical scale, in which he starts with the singular *imagen* and develops a theory of the complication of this primal aspect of lyric:

Primero está la *Imagen*, esto es, la palabra. La palabra en su sentido primitivo, ingenuo, de primer grado, intuitivo, generalmente ahogado en su valor lógico de juicio, de pensamiento. En segundo lugar contamos con la *Imagen refleja o simple*, esto es, la imagen tradicional estudiada en las retóricas. En tercer lugar, la *Imagen doble*. La imagen representa, a la vez, dos objetos, contiene en sí una doble virtualidad. Disminuye la precisión, aumenta el poder sugestivo. Se hallan aisladas en los clásicos: los creacionistas las prodigan constantemente. En cuarto lugar, encuentra la *Imagen triple, cuádruple*, etc. Advertid cómo nos vamos alejando de la literatura tradicional. Estas imágenes que se presentan a varias interpretaciones, serían tachadas desde el antiguo punto de vista como gravísimos extravíos, de ogminidad, anfibología, extravagancia, etc. Finalmente, está la *Imagen multiple*. No explica nada; es intraducible a la prosa. Es la Poesía, en el más puro sentido de la palabra. Es también, y exactamente, la Música, que es

substancialmente el arte de las imágenes múltiples; todo valor disuasivo, escolástico, filosófico, anecdótico, es esencialmente ajeno a ella. La música no quiere decir nada. (Diego 26-7)

Diego's ultimate conceptualization of the "*imagen múltiple*" expresses the aesthetic apex of *creacionista* poetry—and *ultraísta* poetry, for the two movements are stylistically almost indistinguishable (Bernal 8-14). Diego's ideal is that poetry is imbued with a sense of musicality that is vacant of rational or semantic meaning, and that this very quality ought to be the dominant aspect of the new avant-garde poetry.

Yet, the various Spanish language avant-garde poetic movements—such as *creacionismo*, *ultraísmo*, and *surrealismo*—took this value of the *imagen* in different ways. The influence of the *imagen* was prevalent throughout the Spanish and Latin American *nueva poesía* of the late 1910s and 1920s, but its usage was as multiplicitous as its desired poetic effects. This eclecticism is evidenced in the numerous manifestos of the Latino avant-gardes. As Juan-Jacobo Bajarlía notes in his chapter, "La imagen como estructura de vanguardia," the *imagen* was often translated by the *vanguardistas* as metaphor (Bajarlía 56-9), in which the *imagen* was realized as a structure of new poetic creation that reflected upon the modern condition by means of momentary epiphanies of judgment and comparison. This understanding of the *imagen* appears quite different from Diego's idea of the *imagen*—and particularly of its highest potential in the "*imagen múltiple*"—as pure music, but it should be considered that the *imagen* as metaphor similarly aspires to a scenario in which poetic sensibility is reduced (or raised, depending on one's point of view) to a level of being that escapes semantic explication and appeals to a more immediate and primordial source of wisdom.

Take, for example, Jorge Luis Borges's essay "Ultraísmo," published in *Nosotros* in December of 1921, in which he offers four key principles for *ultraísta* poetry and its treatment of the *imagen*: "La reducción de la lírica a su elemento primordial: la metáfora, y la tachadura de las frases medianeras, los nexos y los adjetivos inútiles. También la abolición de los trebejos ornamentales, el confesionalismo, la circunstanciación, las prédicas y la nebulosidad rebuscada. Incluso, la íntesis de dos o más imágenes en una, que ensancha de ese modo su facultad de sugerencia" (Borges 468).

Borges's urge towards economy, synthesis, and suggestiveness hints at Diego's idea of the musicality of the *imagen* insofar as the poetic recourse to achieve Borges's proposed goals for *ultraísmo* seems necessarily to appeal to a sensibility of conciseness and harmony that cannot be realized through convention, description, or rhetorical explanation but rather through a siphoning of lyric poetry to some basic aspect. In Borges's view, *ultraísta* poetry ought to pare away both the trappings and the recognition of traditional high poetic narrative while maintaining the capacity for nuance, lyricism, and imagery of the poem. So in this sense, Borges's idealized vision of the *imagen* is one that is closer to Diego's version of the musical *imagen* than immediately evident. The metaphorical *imagen* of Borges and the musical *imagen* of Diego both strive for an untainted, uncorrupted aesthetic element of poetry, and, since both are vitally grounded in the theory of the lyric, are contingent not upon the visual image (as one might expect from the terminology of *imagen*) but rather upon a fundamental exploration of the evocative faculties of the sonorous.

Such explorations are common—if not identifying—aspects of many of the Spanish and Latin American avant-gardes. However, these explorations are directed by many differing motives, and these differences in objective result in a wide range of permutations. Diego's

objective for *creacionismo* is to utilize the *imagen* so as to “invent that which does not exist”—a sentiment shared by nearly all the Latin American vanguard poetic movements of the early twentieth century (Bernal 43-6). Borges’s objective for *ultraísmo*—as outlined by the four principles in his essay of the same name—seems somewhat more reactionary, reacting explicitly in opposition to the conventional tendencies of his immediate historical precursors, as evidenced by his lexicon of negation. Other poetic movements that access the *imagen* in Diego’s sense of the term present different objectives, colored by their cultural contexts and historical moments. Take, for example, the “Manifiesto euforista,” written by the Puerto Ricans Tomás L. Batista and Vicente Palés Matos and published in *El Imparcial* in November of 1922. In this manifesto, the *euforista* agenda is illustrated as a revision of sentimental and lyric poetry, imbued with the life-force of contemporary modern society and material culture: “¡Viva la máquina, la llave, la aldaba, la tuerca, la sierra, el marrón, el truck, el brazo derecho, el cuarto de hotel, el vaso de agua, el porter, la navaja, el delirium tremens, el puntapiés y el aplauso!” (Batista and Matos 3).

The particular contexts and objectives of the various Spanish-speaking avant-gardes of the early twentieth century constitute quite different realizations of the *imagen modernista*. Nevertheless, their avant-garde tendencies seem to coalesce around some unifying aspect of expression, especially in their reverence for the lyric’s ability to express more than what it says. The *vanguardistas*—in all their myriad names—owe much to Diego and his articulation of the concept of the *imagen-as-music*, for the radicalizations of lyrical expression the avant-gardists wished to exhibit are summarily encapsulated by his idea that “with words we can make a thing similar to music, by means of multiple images” (Diego 27).

The most vibrant and promising tendency of the Spanish and Latin American avant-gardes in utilizing the *imagen* as a revised poetic form is onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is the

ultimate vehicle to achieve (in Diego's terms) the *imagen múltiple*, or poetry-as-music, in lyric poetics. Although mimetic in connotation, onomatopoeia is the very use of language to mean entirely in its sounds and not in a system of preordained codified understanding—precisely the mode Diego foretold when he said (of the musical poetics of the *imagen múltiple*) that ‘music wishes to say nothing.’ To articulate sounds which have little semantic function but rather conjure sense in the unconscious realm of familiarity, and to take the measure to transliterate them as such, is to practice a poetics that assumes the *vanguardista* aspiration to ‘invent that which does not exist’—onomatopoeia in its truest etymological sense: ‘name-making.’

Of the Spanish and Latin American avant-gardes, *ultraísmo* (from roughly 1918 to 1923) and *negrismo* (of the late 1920s until as far as the 1950s) were two movements that most extensively employed onomatopoeics to construct their idealized poetic worlds. However, it should be understood that the majority of the texts from these two movements do not exhibit onomatopoeic tendencies, especially in the instance of *ultraísmo*; onomatopoeia, in spite of being a fantastic vehicle for the *imagen múltiple* and its related conceits of para-semantic voice, is not fully developed in *vanguardista* lyric.

Yet, of that which was developed, the onomatopoeics of *ultraísmo* and *negrismo* appear to express and center around existentialist questions of identity, knowledge, and memory. The use of onomatopoeia in these movements of poetry generally gives voice to a mysterious other, be it a being familiar to our consciousness but commonly inarticulate, or else the poet's voice itself. The onomatopoeia captures an aspect of the experience of the familiar that is unfamiliar to speech, thereby inscribing a poetry characteristically modern in its articulations of the negative capability of the present.

These articulations of the mysterious voices of the modern world tend to take two general forms. Although both are firmly grounded in the inquiry of the conditions of existence for modern humanity, the onomatopoeia of *ultraísmo* tends to voice the character of the machine, in all its forms of automobile, train, factory, or clock, whereas the onomatopoeia of *negrismo* voices the imagined culture and language of the Spanish Caribbean's African ancestry, lost in the conquest of slavery and genocide but surviving in the complexion and lore of its progeny. These are two extremely different directions for the onomatopoeics of the *vanguardistas*, for the former addresses modernity in its context of mechanization and technology while the latter addresses modernity in its legacy of colonization and racism. One is about technological progress in the vein of futurism, the other humanism by means of primitivism. For precisely this duality, the juxtaposition of *ultraísmo* and *negrismo* yields a valuable comparison in exploring the objectives of onomatopoeics in Spanish-speaking avant-garde poetry.

Many of the earliest *ultraísta* poems that incorporate onomatopoeia in their verse do so only slightly. Take as an example the poem "Conjunción abismo" by the Spaniard Rafael Lasso de la Vega.¹ It is a thirty-six line poem, composed in free verse, which depicts a solemn urban landscape. The poem oscillates within the contradiction of a vacant city, whereupon a 'solitary street corner' and 'the great silence of a thousand ears' play host to 'mysterious things [that] have passed through here/horrible shadows, words in obscurity.' The sense of mystery lies in the dark undertone of the emptiness of modern society—the new worlds of the twentieth-century city leave traces of hollow impersonality, putrid waste, and uncertain ruins.

The poem sustains the despair of this pessimistic view of the contemporary city yet culminates in an insinuation of the utter stagnation of time:

bien entendido

a mano derecha, señorita mecanógrafa
 peluquería, imprenta hace bastante frío
 las piezas del ajedrez ahora
 suena cló cló el canalón de diciembre
 conversación ocurrencias el humo de la pipa
 o el piano mecánico a estas hornas con todas las revistas
 y un bello rostro conocido hasta el día siguiente.

Onomatopoeisis appears once in this poem: the “cló cló” of the ‘large December gutter.’ Of all the fragmented images of inanimate objects and object indifference in this poem, it is the drain of the gutter that articulates its onomatopoeitic voice. This confinement is significant; the gutter alludes to the hidden receptacle of our waste, where the excrement of urban society is carried away and kept from infecting the populace. The gutter is the lowest monument of civilization, perhaps in this case a modern symbol of the passage to a literal underworld. To give voice to the gutter via onomatopoeia makes it the most salient speaking character in Vega’s muted world.

This is what onomatopoeia in *ultraísta* poetry often accomplishes; by ‘inventing that which does not exist,’ the recognizable voices of everyday life are replaced by the sounds of commonly ignored inanimate objects and background noise. These new voices serve as metonyms for the exalted new worlds of *ultraísta* creation. Another fine example of this reconfiguration of poetic voice through onomatopoeia is Francisco Vighi’s poem “Tertulia,” also published in *Grecia* in 1920. This forty-nine line poem depicts, from the perspective of ‘I—the ninth Spanish poet’—the sounds, smells, and overall tenor of a lively café, moving abruptly from sense to sense by means of shifting between descriptions and impressions. Once again, as with “Conjunción abismo,” onomatopoeitic expression is stayed until the final stanza:

Discusión sin fin
 sobre si es ultraísta Valle-Inclán
 que si patatín
 que si patatán.
 En el mostrador suena un timbre trin...
 trin... trin... triiinn...
 unos pocos pagan y todos se van.
 ...Silencio, sombra, cucarachas bajo el diván.

There are two onomatopoeic moments in this stanza: the transliterated sound of the bell on the bar counter and the dissected expression *patatín-patatán*. The sounds “trin... trin” interrupt the scene—the conversation about the author Ramón del Valle-Inclán is shunted, as are all other conversations in the bar, apparently ended by the café’s last call. The chiming of the bell hints at the delirium of the café’s atmosphere; in the same way that speech can penetrate a roomful of silence, the “trin... trin” here penetrates a roomful of talk. The liveliness of the *tertulia* permeates the café to the point where people become a background substance, and the machine of the bell or clock reclaims the control of order and conscience. Ironically, in this poem, the commanding utterance of a mindless contraption restores the frolickers—lost in revelry and banter—to the human trait of discipline.

The other instance of onomatopoeia in this stanza is more complex. Since the expression *patatín-patatán* denotes a playful, apologetic response that avoids a reasonable answer to a question of justification, the words do not really mean anything—by convention, they stand in place of conclusive logic, like “blah blah blah” does in English. Answering a question with *patatín-patatán* is not really an answer at all. It is merely a convention of the cadence—not

semantics—of speech, so in this sense the onomatopoetic mimesis of this moment in the stanza expresses the babbling sounds of conversation itself. Moreover, the split of the term *patatín-patatán* to span two lines of verse elaborates the nonsense further by stretching the expression into a longer, more melodic phrase. The melody of repetition mimics the rhythm of the prior line, as well as the whole name of Valle-Inclán: “Ramón del Valle-Inclán/que si patatín/que si patatán”. Not only do the lines work onomatopoetically but also formulate a more subtle, nuanced play between syntax and sound.

Such a subtlety exists as well in much of the work by the Cuban *vanguardista* Mariano Brull, whose poems paved the way for the onomatopoetic aesthetic of *negrismo*. Brull’s earliest work—his first book, *La casa del silencio*, appeared in 1916—exhibited much of the romantic tendencies of a prior generation of poets, but over time his poetry developed his own distinct character as a writer of the Antilles. The following poem, “Mi eternidad y el mar,” published in *Poemas en menguante* (1928), contains an aspect of careful play between sounds and words that transforms the visual signs of writing into a medium for expressing a vocal counter meaning:

Mi eternidad y el mar.

Mi eternidad y las estrellas.

Mi eternidad –niño

mar –mar niño:

¡hijo mío!

—¡Padre mar! (Brull 8)

The subtle verbal play of the poem rests on the words *mi eternidad*. If one conjoins the sounds of the two words into one, the result would closely resemble the word *maternidad*, which

infuses the poem with a feminine present that, coupled with the feminine “estrella,” balances the male gender of “niño” and “padre.” The balance establishes the duality of mother and father, as evidenced by the title (*maternidad* and “Padre mar”) as well as the trinity of mother, father, and child.

This verbal manipulation by Brull is a manifestation of the curiosity of Latin American avant-garde poets with the meaningful potential of sound itself. *Ultraísta* poetics also engages at times in this inquiry into the defamiliarization of words, not solely in the sense of onomatopoesis but also in interrogating the spaces of transrationality. The Chilean *ultraísta* poet Vicente Huidobro, one of the leading figures of the Latin American avant-gardes, epitomizes this modern interrogation of sounds and words in the poem “Sin por qué,” from his book *Ver y palpar 1923-1933* (1941):

Arum arum
 Por qué he dicho arum
 Por qué ha venido a mi sin timonel
 Y al azar de los vientos
 Qué significa esta palabra sin ojos
 Ni manos de estrella.
 Tú la has puesto en mi cabeza
 Es la noche que la trajo a mis oídos
 La noche de mi oído abierto a los peligros
 Después de un largo camino de bosques en marcha
 Y el sueño preparado
 El sueño pronto

Pronto prontooo

Arum arum

Arum en mi cerebro

Arum en mis miradas

Toda mi cabeza es arum.

Mis manos son arum

El mundo es arum

Arum el infinito

Arum me cierra el paso

Es un muro enorme ante mis pies

Arum del sufrimiento girando en su molino

Arum de la alegría

De mi fatiga y de mis vértigos

Quiero morir

He naufragado al fondo de mi alma

En algo repentino y sin raíces

Arum me mata

Dulce asesino tan gratuito

Como el canario de alta mar

Arum arum. (Huidobro 108-109)

The incantation of the words “arum arum” is conjured by the mystery of the word’s meaning; the word is a sign of uncertainty, instability, or emptiness, transformed by its various contexts and the shifting mood of the poem. “Arum” is the embodiment of the unknown, questioned by the voice of the poem. “Sin por qué” articulates a discontent with the word. Like Brull’s “Mi eternidad y el mar,” Huidobro’s poem exemplifies a quality of sound poetry that both combines the meaningful ambiguities of sound to themes of the mysterious as well as informs the onomatopoeics of the Spanish-speaking avant-gardes of the broader theoretical introspection of the conditions of human existence, language, and thought.

These examples of subtle verbal play—in the poems of Vega, Vighi, Brull, and Huidobro—illustrate the depth of possibilities for onomatopoeic voice in comparison to those texts of *ultraísmo* and *negrismo* that are more thoroughly onomatopoeic. The following lines of verse² comprise Brull’s most famous contribution to *negrista* poetry, lines of words that have no literal meaning yet evoke in their rhythm a voice commonly interpreted as of African descent:

Filiflama alabe cundre

ala olalúnea alífera

alveolea jitanjáfora

liris salumba salífera.

Olivia oleo olorife

alalai cánfora sandra

milingítara jirófora

zumbra ulalindre calandra. (Qtd. in Reyes 197)

Although the poem is truly a composition of sound poetry, without the slightest *negrista* inclination, later poets of *negrismo* used this poem as a basis for the *negrista* aesthetic. The word “jitanjáfora” of the third line was appropriated by *negrista* poets—particularly the Cuban Nicolás Guillén—and fashioned as a term to signify the use of sound poetics in expressing an aesthetically Africanist resonance. For the *negristas*, the *jitanjáfora* supplements a lack of familiarity with African languages necessary to compose authentically African poetry; with the notable exception of the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos and some more minor *negrista* poets, most *negristas* primarily used *jitanjáforas* (rather than words borrowed from African languages such as Yoruba and Lucumí) to conjure the feelings and rhythms of African culture.

Although Matos often used a vocabulary of existing African words and names, he too composed many poems with *jitanjáforas*—or, perhaps more accurately, in the spirit of *jitanjáfora*. For example, take his famous poem “Ñam-ñam,” written in 1932 and published in *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1937). The poem repeats the term “ñam-ñam” to interesting effect. Of course, *ñam-ñam* means ‘yum-yum,’ which at first glance by a contemporary reader seems innocuous and infantile, but the repetition of the phrase nested within the context of the poem’s imagery defamiliarizes it, gives it an African voice, produces an ominous tone, and effectively renders it *jitanjáfora*. Of the twenty-eight lines, here are the first two stanzas:

Ñam-ñam. En la carne blanca
 los dientes negros—ñam-ñam.
 Las tijeras de las bocas
 sobre los muslos—ñam-ñam.
 Van y bienen las quijadas
 con sordo ritmo—ñam-ñam.

La feroz noche deglute
bosques y junglas— ñam-ñam.

Ñam-ñam. África mastica
en el silencio—ñam-ñam,
su cena de exploradores
y misioneros—ñam-ñam.

Quien penetró en Tangañica
por primera vez—ñam-ñam;
quien llegó hasta Tembandumba
la gran matriarca—ñam-ñam. (Matos 518)

The phrase *ñam-ñam*, though now a Spanish convention (“Ñam”), was invented by Matos. It is pure onomatopoeia, a transliteration of the sound of heavy chewing, but what makes it *jitanjáfora* is its context. The narrative of Africa’s revenge spirals around the steady chant of the phrase, presumably an utterance of the voice of Africa itself, producing an effect akin to the inventiveness of *jitanjáfora*. In this vein, the sound of *ñam-ñam* seems allusive; Mayra Santos Febres has argued that the sound invokes the *ñame*, the tuber of “white flesh” that is a staple of the Antillean diet (López-Baralt 518). This onomatopoeia can also be read as allusive to the West African religion of the *ñañigo*, building connotation on the onomatopoeia within its context: chewing as a metaphor for the larger metaphysical conceit of Africa’s vengeance against the Western colonial world. The tone of this idiomatic expression, coined by Matos, parallels the ominous insinuations of the poem. Consider the final stanza, in which the comparisons made between America, Europe, and Africa imply a foreshadowing of Africa’s predatorial return:

Así sueña su nirvana.

América baila el jazz.

Europa juega y teoriza.

África gruñe: ñam-ñam. (Matos 518)

The sonorous connotations of the phrase *ñam-ñam* sound appropriate for the poem's theme of mysterious and threatening vigilance. Even though *ñam-ñam* sounds like the very familiar act of chewing, its defamiliarization in its context allows it to absorb the menacing tone of the narrative and assume at least part of the identity of an unknown African tongue.

For *negrista* poetry and the use of the *jitanjáfora*, the objective of embodying through sound the cultural connotations of African identity and ancestry is that which entirely gives meaning to the onomatopoeic form. In “Ñam-ñam,” the dark undertone of the poem and the metaphor of a feeding beast construct the meaning of the onomatopoesis of *ñam-ñam*. By contrast, the poem “La rumba” (1928) by the Cuban José Zacarías Tallet—though equally onomatopoeic in form—expresses a much more festive aspect of Afro-Caribbean culture and identity. Here are the poem's first six lines:

¡Zumba, mamá, la rumba y tambó!

¡Mabimba, mabomba, mabomba y bombó!

¡Zumba, mamá, la rumba y tambó!

¡Mabimba, mabomba, mabomba y bombó!

¡Cómo baila la rumba la negra Tomasa!

¡Cómo baila la rumba José Encarnación!

The onomatopoesis of the first couplet establishes the rhythm and percussion of the *rumba*'s form of music and dance. Moreover, the repetition of this rhythmic phrase lends to the poem the serial element vital to music. It is the repetition of syncopation here that illustrates the key components of Afro-Caribbean music: complicated, unpredictable melodic phrases arranged in a patterned, organized sequence of beats. The rhythm of the repeated lines “¡Zumba, mamá, la rumba y tambó!/¡Mabimba, mabomba, mabomba y bombó!” keeps the time of an eight-beat measure, like the *rumba*.

Although the *jitanjáfora* of the poem brings to life the music of the *rumba*, the lines that follow this onomatopoeic device inform the poem of a key aspect of Caribbean cultural heritage: syncretism. In this poem, the dance of the *rumba* is performed by “la negra Tomasa,” clearly an African woman, and “José Encarnación,” a man with a Spanish, and Christian, name. As the poem goes on, the dance between these two identities develops, maintaining the festive, sensual mood of the *rumba* but also expressing a tension that has a sense of the gravity of a religious ceremony, or even sacrifice. The tension between the man of the Christian name and the “negra Tomasa” presents a picture of the syncretization of African and Spanish culture, religion, language, music—even bodies.

Tallet's “La rumba” and Matos's “Ñam-ñam” are two prime examples of how *negrista* poets employ onomatopoeia—via the *jitanjáfora*—to express voices of the African diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the respective subjects of these poems—the carnivore metaphor for Africa, the music of the polyglot Caribbean—encompass different virtues of this mode. The possibilities for onomatopoeics in *negrismo* are as diverse as the cultural contexts and attitudes of the African diaspora. Hence, although driven by a shared aspiration, the onomatopoeics of *jitanjáfora* take various forms.

Likewise, the majority of the diverse instances and uses of onomatopoesis in *ultraísta* poetry, e.g. the “cló cló” of the gutter in Vega’s “Conjunción abismo” and the “trin... trin” of the bell in Vighi’s “Tertulia,” seem to share a common theme: the emergent voice of the modern machine. Take as another example “Un automóvil pasa” (published in *Grecia* in 1919) by the Spaniard Xavier Boveda:

Oú, oú, oú:

lentamente un automóvil pasa...

Oú, oú, oú:

el automóvil continuamente canta.

Y el motor

lo acompaña

retozón.

Trrrrrrrrr

Trrrrrrrrr

Hay una luz ultravioleta, que ilumina

el interior del automóvil

donde la anciana que lo ocupa,

entre el <<cú>> y el <<trrr>>, evoca

recuerdos suaves del pasado...

Si es una niña, se acuerda

del rubio novio, del amado

con quien bailó, en aquella noche,

aquel <<fox-trot>> tan exaltado.

Oú, ou, ou.

El automóvil lanza

frenético...

Trrrrrrrrr

y, veloz,

se pierde, al fin, en tontananza...

Po-po-po-pöc.

Clearly the onomatopoesis in this poem articulates the sounds of the automobile. However, the identity of the automobile itself is made ambiguous by the poem's sense of time and the present. On first glance, the transliteration of the sounds of the automobile appears simplistic and descriptively imprecise, yet understandable—if not expected—from a poem written in the 1920s, when the automobile and its accompanying sounds were still very new and foreign to many a contemporary ear.

But the automobile in this poem is not one of the present—it is not the car of the 1920s but the car of a future time. This is evident in the story of an old woman remembering a youthful experience of dancing a foxtrot with a handsome boyfriend, something she must have done sometime in the 1920s when the foxtrot was a popular nightclub dance—meaning the present of this poem is in the future. Furthermore, the light inside the car is ultraviolet, an amenity that obviously did not exist in cars in the early twentieth century. The insinuated narrative of the poem produces a transformation of the moment; the brevity of the episode is expanded by the implied context of a distant future. Thus, the onomatopoesis of the sounds of the car in this poem take on a different significance; the oddness of the car's sounds is due to an imagined,

future technology. In this poem, the source of the onomatopoeia is truly mysterious, for it is an envisioning of what has yet to come.

In “Un automóvil pasa,” the narrative substance of the poem is vital to the understanding of its onomatopoeics. This reliance for the onomatopoeics of both *ultraísmo* and *negrismo* is an important interaction between rational and transrational language—in all the poems discussed thus far, the onomatopoeic meanings of sound are infused with contexts and connotations expressed through the majority part of the poems that are not transrational but semantic, expressive, and meaningful. In these poems, the disjunction of the ersatz language of onomatopoeia is tied to the logic of rational language and therefore prevents the onomatopoeics of their composition to escape a conventional logic. This quality is what establishes onomatopoeia and differentiates it from ordinary sound poetry or transrational language. Onomatopoeia implies both mimesis and standard language. It implies mimesis because the sound of onomatopoeia sounds *like* something. But onomatopoeia also implies standard language because onomatopoeia is an attempt at coinage: to express that which has no denotation.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to say that onomatopoeia only functions in poetry alongside narrative. Take, for example, the *ultraísta* poem “Tren en marcha” by the Uruguayan Alfredo Mario Ferreiro, published in his collection *El hombre que se comió un autobús* (1927):

Toco-tócoto

trán trán

Toco-tócoto

trán trán

Recatracata, paf-paf.

speaking avant-gardes: to express through an unusual metonymy of irrational sound the emergent voices of the modernist moment.

Negrista verse employed sheer onomatopoeia, too, to its own primitivist effect. True to the purpose of Africanizing sound poetry, poets such as Guillén, Matos, and Tallet composed verse with liberal use of onomatopoeia (e.g. Matos's "Danza negra," Guillén's "Sensemayá,") that had roots in folklore and oral tradition (Arnedo-Gómez 130). Ramón Guirao preserved some of this *música de bamba* (Arnedo-Gómez 131) in *Órbita de la poesía afrocubana, 1928-37* (1938), of which the following sample comes from "Cantos de cabildo":

Piqui, piquimbín,
 piqui, piquimbín;
 tumba, muchacho,
 yama bo y tambó.
 Tambó ta brabbo.
 Tumba, cajero.
 Jabla, mula.
 Piqui, piquimbín,
 piqui, piquimbín.
 Pa, pa, pa, práca,
 prácata, pra, pa.
 Cucha, cucha mi bo. (Qtd. in Guirao 3)

In *negrismo*, this practice of onomatopoeics is employed to "arouse the senses, while its rhythm marks the rhythm of black music and dance, substituting the instruments of music" (Mansour 162). On the other hand, in *ultraísmo*, the use of onomatopoeics articulates various

manifestations of the modern machine, where the sounds of cars, trains, and alarms assert a dominance over the human voice of introspection and contemplation. But in spite of their significant differences in tone and aesthetic, both movements share a common ideal for poetic composition, one that can be found in the words of Diego: “Poetry...is...Music...Every person puts the label of his own interiority upon Music, and this imprecise sign varies according to our emotional state” (Diego 27).

Beyond the similarities in form, if the onomatopoeics of *ultraísmo* and *negrismo* share a common theme, it is in positing a voice of the mysterious. When onomatopoeia appears in these poems, the verse that envelops the sound poetry tends to reflect a sense of mystery, or the unknown, be it a soulless clock that sounds the end of a lively party, a futuristic car that sparks a nostalgic memory, the jaws of Africa gnawing on its oppressors, or the rhythm of a music born from plantation culture. Each instance is infused with confusion, insofar as the onomatopoeia connects poetic voice with an identity predominantly unfamiliar to such expressive form. In the example of “Tren en marcha,” where the poem is entirely onomatopoeia, the mysteriousness is far deeper—not only is the vocal anthropomorphism unusual but the absence of semantics renders interpretation moot. As Gloria Videla asserts of *ultraista* poetics, “this depreciation of communication in coherent content arrives at hermeticism, obscurity, and mystery” (Videla 95). The mystery in the onomatopoeics of *ultraísmo* and *negrismo* resides in the improbability of that which speaks. And yet, whether African ancestry or mindless technology, the speaking subjects of onomatopoeics seem to find a voice in music: music, perhaps, that wishes to say something.

Notes

¹ Born in Seville in 1890, Vega spent much of his adult life traveling to Switzerland and France, where he later aligned himself with Dadaism. Much of his poetry was originally composed in French, as was “Conjunción abismo,” of which the Spanish translation (by J. G. de Silva) was published in *Grecia* in 1920.

² See Reyes, 194. Reyes says that this composition by Brull was written for his daughters to recite for Brull’s father-in-law, a Dr. Baralt, in playful yet serious reaction to Dr. Baralt’s incessant recitations of Romantic and Restoration poetry at family gatherings. Reyes gives no date for the composition, but the verses had great influence on early *negrista* poets and other writers of the Caribbean.

Works Cited

- Arnedo-Gómez, Miguel. *Writing Rumba: The Afrocubanist Movement in Poetry*.
Charlottesville: U Virginia P, 2006.
- Bajarlía, Juan-Jacobo. *La polémica Reverdy-Huidobro: origen del ultraísmo*. Buenos Aires:
Editorial Devenir, 1964.
- Batista, Tomás L. and Vicente Palés Matos. "Manifiesto euforista." *El Imparcial* (Nov. 1922): 3.
- Bernal, José Luis. *El ultraísmo: ¿historia de un fracaso?* Universidad de Extremadura:
Cáceres, 1988.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Ultraísmo." *Nosotros* 39.151 (1921): 466-471.
- Boveda, Xavier. "Un automóvil pasa." *Grecia* 2.13 (1919).
- Brull, Mariano. *Poemas en menguante*. Paris: Le Moil et Pascaly, 1928.
- Collazos, Oscar. *Los vanguardismos en la América Latina*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península,
1977.
- Diego, Gerardo. "Posibilidades creacionistas." *Cervantes* (Oct. 1919): 23-28.
- Ferreiro, Alfredo Mario. *El hombre que se comió un autobús*. Montevideo: La Cruz del Sur,
1927.
- Guirao, Ramón, ed. *Órbita de la poesía afrocubana, 1928-37*. Habana: Ucar, García y Cía,
1938.
- Huidobro, Vicente. *Ver y palpar*. Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Ercilla, 1941.
- Larraga, Ricardo. *Mariano Brull y la poesía pura en Cuba*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1994.
- López-Baralt, Mercedes, ed. *La poesía de Luis Palés Matos*. Edición Crítica. San Juan: U
Puerto Rico, 1995.
- Mansour, Mónica. *La poesía negrista*. México City: Ediciones Era, 1973.

Matos, Luis Palés. “Ñam-ñam.” López-Baralt 518.

“Ñam.” *HarperCollins Spanish Unabridged Dictionary*. 5th ed. 1999.

Reyes, Alfonso. *La experiencia literaria*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1942.

Santos Febres, Mayra. “Desde el balcón estructuralista: una relectura del *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* de Luis Palés Matos.” Thesis. U Puerto Rico, San Juan, 1987.

Tallet, José Zacarias. “La rumba.” *Atuey* (1928).

Vega, Rafael Lasso (de la). “Conjunción abismo.” *Grecia* 2.47 (1920).

Videla, Gloria. *El ultraísmo*. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1963.

Vighi, Francisco. “Tertulia.” *Grecia* 2.47 (1920).