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## **Havana Reads the Harlem Renaissance: Langston Hughes, Nicolás Guillén, and the Dialectics of Transnational American Literature**

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DIALECTICS OF TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN LITERATURE

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*John Patrick Leary*

On April 20, 1930, the Cuban journalist Gustavo Urrutia wrote to Langston Hughes in New York to announce the publication of a new set of poems, *Motivos de son* [*Son Motifs*], by a young Cuban poet named Nicolás Guillén, whom Hughes had met on his recent trip to Havana. Guillén's poems had just been published in "Ideales de una raza" ["Ideals of a Race"], the weekly black-interest section edited by Urrutia. It ran in the Sunday edition of the conservative Havana daily *Diario de la Marina* from 1928 until it was withdrawn under political pressure from the national government.

As the editor of "Ideales de una raza," Urrutia played a major role in Cuba's *afrocubanista* (Afro-Cuban) movement. In his letter to the young American poet, Urrutia solicited the American's support and predicted happily that Guillén's *Motivos de son* would scandalize the local black bourgeoisie with its frank use of the vulgar slang and popular music of urban Cubans of color. Hughes, who had recently returned from a March visit to Cuba covered carefully by Urrutia's reporters, was also well known among the Havana literati for *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), parts of which had already been translated in "Ideales" and publications

like *Social*, Cuba's premier cultural review of the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Urrutia wrote in his letter to Hughes:

I feel exceedingly [*sic*] happy in this moment on account of *eight formidable negro* poems written by our Guillén in our negro page of to-day. They are something grand. The name of the series is *Motivos de Son*. You know very well what this means. They are real, Cuban negro poetry written in the very popular slang. They are the exact equivalent of your "blues." The language and feelings of our dear negroes made most noble by the love and talent of our own artists. I am only sorry that you will be unable to translate, and even understand what these poems mean, but you must know that the spirit of them is same [*sic*] as the blues. Some ones are sad, some are ironical, others are sociological, viz. *Oyé me dijeron negro*.<sup>2</sup>

Urrutia is careful in this letter to translate the meaning of Guillén's work into a North American racial vocabulary, insisting conspiratorially that Hughes knows "very well what this means" ("this" could refer either to the importance of Guillén's poems or to the collection's title). Finally, Urrutia equates the *son*—the Afro-Cuban ballad form of the Havana working class and rural peasantry that inspired Guillén's collection—with "your blues." As scholars of the Hughes-Guillén encounter have done ever since, Urrutia is careful to draw racial analogies between Cuba and the United States, which he then uses to compare the work of the two young black poets, inspired as they both were by music, radical politics, and modernist poetics.

This letter has been routinely misinterpreted in American scholarship, beginning with its reading by Hughes's influential biographer, Arnold Rampersad. Hughes and Guillén met on the American's second trip to Havana, where they struck up a friendship and a long correspondence and eventually began a collaboration that resulted in Hughes's cotranslation of Guillén's poetry. Rampersad argues that Urrutia's complimentary remarks confirm Hughes's influence on Guillén: just as the American poet had combined the rhythms and structure of blues forms and popular speech in his *Weary Blues*, Guillén had done the same with the *son*. "For the first time, as Hughes had urged him to do," writes Rampersad, "Guillén had used the *son* dance rhythms to capture the moods and features of the black Havana poor."<sup>3</sup> Many American critics have similarly attributed Guillén's decision to incorporate *son* rhythms and popular slang into "high" poetry to Hughes's influence.<sup>4</sup> The scholarly misinterpretations of Urrutia's letter overlook two important aspects of his communication to Hughes: firstly,

his apparent, surely strategic flattery of a famous and potentially powerful advocate for Guillén's work abroad ("You know how much we appreciate you," he gushes. "This explains why I communicate with you on this exiting [*sic*] matter before I do with any other of my friends"). Secondly, Urrutia is carefully translating, for Hughes's benefit, Cuban cultural forms and racial regimes into a particularly North American racial vernacular—that of "your blues" and "negro poems"—that many U.S. critics misapprehend as a global one. Even Ian Smart, an American Marxist scholar who admires Guillén, calls the meeting with Hughes a "catalyst" for Guillén's mature poetry and appears to take for granted that the racial "ferment" of the U.S. New Negro movement was an export commodity.<sup>5</sup>

These misinterpretations of Hughes's influence and of the easy commensurability of blues and *son* are critical not only for the relatively rarified fields of Hughes and Guillén scholarship but for the broader field of "diaspora" or "transnational" American literary studies. Most English-language scholarship of Hughes's Cuban ventures rarely considers the unequal relations of cultural prestige and political power between Harlem, New York City, and Havana, Cuba—yet Guillén and his Cuban contemporaries were keenly attentive to these circumstances. Indeed, Guillén's journalistic writings on Hughes's well-publicized visits to the island and the prose and poetry he wrote about the African American revival contain a great deal of sometimes subtle, and often explicit, criticism of his American colleagues. Moreover, as a translator and correspondent of Guillén's, Hughes struggled with the difficulty of translating a specifically Cuban vernacular, as well as the country's racial codes, into an American English idiom. In their eagerness to celebrate this case of cross-cultural solidarity, some literary historians have neglected the cultural *conflict* that makes such partnerships both necessary and difficult to achieve in the first place. Moving beyond speculative fantasies of diasporic unity and of poetic influence, this article considers the Hughes/Guillén contact in a fuller, more dialectical context, which concentrates on the inevitable conflicts and miscommunications that accompanied and occasionally frustrated the internationalist desires of the Afro-Cuban revival and the New Negro movement (and later, the third worldism of Guillén's post-1959 career). These miscommunications—of which the misidentification of *son* and blues is an example—are part of the dynamics of cultural translation. As Emily Apter points out, in literary translation it is the struggle with the linguistic inassimilability of the original—and the ever-present prospect of translation failure—that constitutes the productive work of translation.<sup>6</sup> In considering the affective dimension of the Hughes-Guillén partnership, we should read their collaboration as a microcosmic example of the slow,

unsteady work of cultural translation and cultural struggle. Indeed, cultural translation is itself often a struggle between dominant and peripheral languages and nations. As Brent Edwards has shown, it the failures and “short circuits” of cross-cultural communication that have helped define diaspora, where cross-cultural encounters are “characterized by unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness.”<sup>7</sup> In the encounter between Hughes and Guillén, and in the “failures” of at least two English translations of Guillén, we come to see the “transnational” not as a unified *field* but as a set of contradictory and difficult *processes* and *practices*, shaped not only by empire and exile and solidarity and border crossing but also always by a combination of these.

### *Mistranslation from Harlem to Havana*

Urrutia’s letter to Hughes strategically proclaims solidarity between the two men and their movements, but it also eloquently communicates some of the conflicts of the Harlem-Havana circuit: the language and knowledge barriers, uneven power relations, and the simple fact of distance. Another distinction that emerges in Guillén’s relationship with Hughes and the Afro-Cuban movement is that between the American and Cuban racial systems. Cuba’s comparatively recent experience of abolition and revolution (slavery was abolished only in 1888, and national independence was nominally achieved in 1898), and its nationalist ideology of racial harmony, indelibly shaped the country’s official racial discourse in ways that Hughes, indeed, noted in his own observations of Cuba. Many of Urrutia’s editorials for “Ideales” underlined the multiracial nationalism typical of Cuban political rhetoric, which, as Urrutia often noted, differed from the politics of the United States where Jim Crow still ruled the south. Given these historical differences, translation imperfectly mediates relationships like the ones between Hughes and his Cuban hosts, underlining the fact that diasporic interconnections are, as Vera Kutzinski notes, always formed by and through language.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in Guillén’s letters to Hughes—the two corresponded regularly during the early 1930s, and then intermittently until 1961, the first year of the Cuba embargo—the labor and the pleasure of translation is a major theme. Guillén’s letters find him groping for English words and then teasing Hughes about his grammatical errors in Spanish. Elsewhere he takes pleasure in teaching his friend *habanero* vulgarities that he insists

Hughes study for his return visits. As anyone who has struggled with the difficult but pleasurable task of forging a friendship in a foreign language knows, translation is a theater of internationalism. Hughes took this up more deliberately when he and the literary critic Ben Carruthers translated *Motivos de son*.

Perhaps the most controversial act of translation in the Harlem-Havana circuit was the rendering of *son*, a rural Cuban ballad form that migrated to Havana during World War I, as “blues.” Like the American blues, *son* is a rural, black popular song genre that traveled with its performers to urban areas during the World War I period, and it refers to a “mood” as well as a formal structure. Nevertheless, the two styles have markedly different rhythmic structures, instrumentation, and lyrical content. *Son* vocalists are almost uniformly male, and their lyrics are usually ribald, comical, and, given the patriotic content of much Afro-Cuban cultural production in this period, occasionally nationalist—*soneros*, for example, could make claims for the charms of “Cuban women” (of any race) that blues musicians could not make for Americans in general.<sup>9</sup> Later Cuban readers of Hughes resisted the equivalence that American readers made between the blues and the *son*, arguing that such translations were simply acts of assimilation that ignored the particularity of the *son* and hence the particularity of Guillén’s poetic use of it. Yet when Hughes and Carruthers made the first English translation of Guillén’s work in their 1948 collection *Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén*, they rendered *Motivos de son* as *Cuban Blues*, making an explicit analogy between the blues and the *son* in an effort to situate the Cuban poems in a North American context—just as Urrutia had tried to do in his letter to Hughes. In Hughes’s own drafts, however, he softens the analogy without abandoning it completely. His own tentative title for the collection was “Blue Notes,” a title whose jazz inflection retains the notion, central to *Motivos de son*, of poetry improvising on musical motifs (*motivos*) without explicitly identifying the poems as a Cuban version of American blues poetry. For reasons that are unclear, however, Hughes’s title was dropped, and the more literal translation of *son* as “blues” prevailed.

*Motivos de son* is a very difficult work to translate because the poems play on a musical form unfamiliar to most American readers and because they mimic a local slang and colloquial pronunciation that can only be reproduced in the terms of some other city’s rough equivalents. For example, Hughes’s and Carruthers’s separate drafts of Guillén’s “Ayé me dijeron negro” (literally, “Yesterday Somebody Called Me Black”) struggle with this dilemma, and their published, joint translation rewrites the poem in an American vocabulary, with a rhyming, musical meter—they title it “Last Night

Somebody Called Me Darky.” Hughes’s draft, held in his personal papers at Yale University (it is signed “LH”), attempts a more literal translation that keeps some of Guillén’s spelling without removing the poem and its narrator to an American setting; in doing so, however, the translation concedes the impossibility of translating Guillén’s use of popular slang and colloquial Spanish pronunciation, the most controversial parts of the poem. The original poem reads: “Ayé me dijeron negro/Pa’ que me fajara yo; pero e’ que me lo desía/era un negro como yo,” in which the final apostrophes—on *pa’* (*para*), for example—signal the elision of the final syllable of various words, in an attempt to reproduce the speed and rhythm of spoken Caribbean Spanish by an implied Afro-Cuban speaker. Compare the opening stanzas of the two signed drafts—Hughes’s on the left, and Carruthers’s very different one (signed “BC”), which appeared in print, on the right:

Yesterday somebody called me black just to make me mad— but the one who said it was just as black as me.	Last night somebody called me darky jes’ to make me fight, but de one who said it to me Is a darky, too, all right. <sup>10</sup>
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Hughes’s translation struggles to be literally faithful to Guillén’s original, but in doing so it sacrifices its musicality and colloquial cadences and hence its locality as well. Their published translation makes a different bargain—in totally rewriting the poem with a North American dialect vernacular, they attempt to translate a formal character of vernacular blackness while leaving its specific content in Havana. Both translations remind us of the original poem’s inassimilability to English; in this productive way, they are both “failures,” as they chafe against what Apter calls “the nub of intractable semantic difference” that should be present in the practice of translation.<sup>11</sup>

Most readers of *Cuban Blues* probably could not turn to the Spanish original, and could not grasp a Cuban working-class accent. The *Motivos* therefore had to be rewritten to be translated, and even while *Cuban Blues* proposes a vernacular diasporic community capable of transgressing linguistic and aesthetic boundaries, inevitably much was lost or elided in this translation. Some Cuban readers as well as some critics of Hughes’s work would come to view this mediation as cultural imperialism. Guillén’s journalistic writings on Hughes’s well-publicized visits to the island, and the prose and poetry he wrote about the African American revival, contain a great deal of sometimes subtle, and often explicit, criticism of his American colleagues that are rarely ever taken seriously by U.S. critics. Indeed, Afro-Cuban

critiques of Hughes and Harlem underscore the dialectical antithesis of transnational American literature's desire for cross-cultural community: for example, the imperial images, nationalist resentments, and mistranslations that also constitute transnational cultures. Concentrating on these short circuits and misunderstandings need not lead one to be pessimistic about internationalism, however. Hughes's searching diaries, his and Carruthers's struggles to translate the Guillén's work, and even the bawdy Spanish lessons Guillén gave his American friend stress how that misunderstanding and the struggle to overcome it were part of building community. In short, in reading Hughes and Guillén we come to see "transnationality" and translation as an aspiration and object of cultural struggle, never as an achieved or natural reality.

Hughes, indeed, seemed aware of this at the time, but he took an optimistic attitude toward his unfulfilled internationalist aspirations. However, his finest Cuba poem takes a melancholic tone. In "To the Little Fort of San Lazaro on the Ocean Front, Havana," Hughes writes of the yawning gap between the romance of city's picturesque oceanfront fortress and the present-day international threats that it is powerless to turn back. The fort is affectionately addressed by the poet as a "Watch tower once for pirates/ That sailed the sun-bright seas—/Red pirates, great romantics." He names a diverse group of three: the Briton Francis Drake, the Frenchman de Plan, and a little-known Havana privateer, Diego El Grillo, known popularly as "El Mulato." The poem continues:

Against such as these  
 Years and years ago  
 You served quite well—  
 When time and ships were slow.  
     But now,  
 Against a pirate called  
 THE NATIONAL CITY BANK  
 What can you do alone?  
 Would it not be  
 Just as well you tumbled down,  
 Stone by helpless stone?<sup>12</sup>

The modern, decidedly unromantic "piracy" of the National City Bank contrasts sharply with the long-gone, well-trod romance of these heroic outlaws of Caribbean folklore. San Lázaro, Hughes suggests, is a beautiful artifact of that time, stubborn but ultimately defeated by the fast new world of global finance capital—transnational community efficiently displaced



by transnational empire. A reader might also ask: if Diego Grillo's day has passed, what can Langston Hughes or Nicolás Guillén do alone?

Hughes visited Havana for the first time in 1927, on a lark before his semester at Lincoln College in Pennsylvania began. He would return by steamship in February 1930 as an established, internationally known poet. "Ideales de una raza" devoted most of two issues to Hughes's visit, and *Revista de la Habana*, a major cultural journal, published a critical study to coincide with the trip. He recalled the voyage in his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, where like every American author who visited Havana before him, he began his account by describing el Morro, the fortress that guards the Bay of Havana. Ironically, he misspells the fortress as "el Moro" (which in Spanish means "moor"):

It was suppertime when we got to El Moro [*sic*] with Havana rising white and Moorish-like out of the sea in the twilight. The evening was warm and the avenues were alive with people, among them many jet-black Negroes in white attire. Traffic filled the narrow streets, auto horns blew, cars' bells clanged, and from the wineshops and fruit-juice stands radios throbbled with drumbeats and the wavelike sounds of maracas rustling endless rumbas. Life seemed fluid, intense, and warm in the busy streets of Havana.<sup>13</sup>

Here and in his private journals, Hughes noted Havana's brightness, its noise, its musicality, and its blackness. In addition to recording the quotidian details of his trip in his diary—like the "fat American from Chicago" in his steamer cabin who "wants to see dirty movies in Havana"—he grappled with Cuba's racial vernacular and the possibilities of fellowship in black Havana. On his final voyage, in April 1931, he assembled a glossary of Cuban racial terms and slurs, and he recorded instances of segregation that he witnessed. His diaries also express some of his utopian and everyday hopes for the trip. "To see ones [*sic*] own people in banks, shops, fine clubs, high positions," he writes and then notes: "Negro artists—Exchange of ideas musicians and painters [*sic*], new rhythms, new colors, and faces. Poets and writers—new backgrounds & basis for comparisons. A paradise for Kodak camera fans."<sup>14</sup>

"Ideales de una raza" used Hughes's visit as an opportunity to show its cosmopolitanism and to make a nationalist defense of racial politics in Cuba against the example of Jim Crow. Urrutia devoted many editions of *Armonías*, his column, to the American "race problem," which was often compared to Cuba's own, usually unfavorably. The article on Hughes details

the poet's run-in with the Ward steamship line in New York, which denied him first-class passage to Havana by first claiming that all seats were sold out and then by asserting that the Cuban consulate had denied Hughes's visa due to exclusion laws for Chinese, Russians, and blacks of any nationality. Under the headline "The Langston Hughes Incident," the paper reprinted letters of protest from Urrutia and the Afro-Cuban legislator Lino D'Ou to the Cuban secretary of state as well as the subsecretary's letter to Hughes and the NAACP confirming that no such exclusion laws existed.<sup>15</sup> "Ideales" discussed the affair as an example of American hypocrisy and of Hughes's admirable determination to resist it. Urrutia's article on the issue asserts as much in terms that simultaneously indicate the Afro-Cuban movement's vexed relationship to Hughes and to the Harlem movement in general:

Otro bardo menos modernista—menos viril—que Langston Hughes estaría ahora en Harlem componiendo algún BLUE lamentable, con imprecaciones y lágrimas finales. Pero este poeta que, como los descritos por Nicolás Guillén, se baña, boxea y ama la aviación ha formado un rebolisco de tamaño colosal en torno al incidente y se vino a la Habana, disfrutó de unas vacaciones encantadoras, según nos dijo, y puso en vibración a las cancillerías de ambos países.<sup>16</sup>

[Another bard less modernist—less virile—than Langston Hughes would now be in Harlem composing some lamentable BLUES, with curses and tearful finales. But this poet, who, from Nicolás Guillén's description, swims, boxes, and loves aviation, has stirred up a great excitement around the incident and come to Havana, enjoyed an enchanting vacation, as he told us, and upset the ministries of both countries.]

Urrutia's praise for Hughes identifies him with a masculine, "modernist" vitality that he contrasts sharply with the effeminate, tearful capitulation of the "lamentable blues," a musical genre closely associated with Hughes's work but criticized as weak and defeatist by some Afro-Cuban critics.

Where Urrutia reflects at a distance on Hughes's modern virility, Guillén's article on the poet's arrival at the Havana docks in the same issue devotes considerable attention to his physical appearance and youth, which seems to defy both his American origins and his poetry's preternatural sophistication. Guillén introduces the interview with a long anecdote about a false description of Hughes he was given before he met him at the Havana docks. The description bears no resemblance to the fist-fighting aviator of Urrutia's

account: as he waits for Hughes to disembark, Guillén says he expects to meet a forty-five-year-old man, “extremely fat,” almost white in color, with an “English moustache decorating his fine and embittered lips.” Guillén confesses how, after reading “The Weary Blues” and “Fine Clothes to the Jew,” he also expected a man of imposing physical stature and middle age. Those who know only his poetry, Guillén says, “would attribute to him a physical maturity at which he has not yet arrived and for which he still has long to wait.” As he finds out, far from being a corpulent, mustachioed Europhilic modernist, Hughes is a thin, affable, almost comically eager *jovencito* of twenty-six, recognizable to Guillén as a plebeian Cuban type. He describes him sardonically, using a term for a light-skinned mulatto: “Parece justamente un ‘mulatico’ cubano. Uno de esos mulaticos intrascendente, que estudian una carrera en la Univ. Nac. y que se pasan la vida organizando pequeñas fiestas familiares a dos pesos el billete” [“He looks just like a Cuban ‘mulatico.’ One of those trivial *mulaticos* that studies for a degree at the National University and spends their lives organizing little parties at two pesos a ticket”]. Guillén’s initial description of Hughes borders on condescending insult.<sup>17</sup>

Rampersad, with some condescension of his own, calls Guillén’s tone in this article “cheeky,” given what he sees as the Cuban’s debt to Hughes. Ellis, by contrast, argues that the article’s tone reflects Guillén’s “self-assurance” about his own poetic vocation, presumably because he felt threatened by Hughes.<sup>18</sup> However, Guillén’s subtle critiques of Hughes are more than simple demonstrations of self-assurance, especially since at this early point, it is unclear what Guillén would have to feel defensive about—*Motivos de son* would not appear in “Ideales” for another month and thus no claims about Hughes’s influence on him had yet been made. Guillén’s articles on Hughes’s visit are notable for their notes of praise and fellow feeling combined with mockery and subtle condescension, but biographical readings of “cheek” and self-assertion do not explain Guillén’s critical tone. Hughes is “modernist,” Guillén writes, yet unlike T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound he is down-to-earth and translatable as a Cuban social type; on the other hand, this type is young and earnest about racial issues, nearly to the point of banality. Guillén even adds a backhanded compliment regarding Hughes’s efforts to learn Spanish: “El castellano de Sr. Hughes no es muy rico. Pero él lo aprovecha maravillosamente” [“Mr. Hughes’s Spanish is not pretty. But he tries marvelously”].<sup>19</sup>

The rest of the article recounts an interview in which Hughes discusses black political and artistic movements around the world and his own experience as a traveler. Hughes discusses his own recent trips to Europe, the southern United States, and Africa. “I have no more ambition,” he

tells Guillén in Spanish, “than to be the poet of the negroes. The negro poet, do you understand?” Guillén responds gravely in the affirmative, quoting approvingly from the Spanish translation of Hughes’s “Negro.” “And from the bottom of my soul,” Guillén writes, “rises that poem with which this man opens his first volume of poems[,] ‘Yo, soy negro: negro, como la noche: negro como las profundidades de mi Africa.’”<sup>20</sup> Again, however, he moves from this serious note of identification with Hughes to a gentle mockery of his American friend’s obsessions with race in Cuba—implying that Hughes should worry less about racial discrimination in Cuba than in the United States. As the two watch a *danzón* performance in one of Havana’s famed *academias de baile* (the euphemistically named “dance academies” known as centers of both *son* music and prostitution), Hughes becomes fascinated to the point of what Guillén suggests is embarrassing exuberance. He describes the American’s reaction, again quoting the poem he earlier celebrated. Here, however, it is not Hughes who is “negro como la noche” but the black Cuban drummer he watches desirously. Guillén writes, “Después, mientras contempla al bongosero, ‘negro como la noche,’ exclama, con un suspiro de ansia insatisfecha: ‘Yo quisiera ser negro. Bien negro. ¡Negro de verdad!’”<sup>21</sup> [“Afterward, while contemplating the bongo player, ‘black as the night,’ he exclaims, with a breath of unsatisfied anxiety: ‘I want to be black. Very black. Black for real’”]. Thus ends Guillén’s “Conversation with Langston Hughes”: in his ironic portrayal, the most famous black poet in the world, and the honored guest of “Ideales,” eagerly seeks out black culture like a hungry tourist seeking some local dish.

As Ellis observes, with his final exclamation—“¡Negro de verdad!”—Guillén is quoting the last line of his 1929 poem “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano.” The poem is an equivocal tribute to Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo, better known as “Kid Chocolate,” the celebrated Cuban boxing champion of the 1920s. The poem is delivered from the point of view of a skeptical observer who admires the boxer’s courage and talents but cautions him not to mistake his fame for freedom. “Pequeña oda” addresses cultural internationalism from the point of view of a nation on the periphery of the global cultural industries. Yet ironically, its acerbic critique of American consumption of Cuban black culture has, in its English translation, been misunderstood, much like the titular boxer himself. The athlete is trapped, the poet says, in a brutal sport in an unforgiving city whose language “sólo te ha de servir para entender sobre la lona/cuanto en su verde slang/mascan las mandíbulas de los que tú derrumbas/jab a jab”<sup>22</sup> [“has only been good enough on the canvas/to understand the filthy slang/spit from the jaws of those you waste/jab by jab”]. As in another imported spectator sport, baseball, Cubans

appropriated American boxing terms as their own, but in New York, “jabs” and “rings” are unforgiving parts of the cold northern cityscape:

El Norte es fiero y rudo, boxeador.  
 Ese mismo Broadway  
 Que en actitud de vena se desangra  
 Para chillar junto a los rings  
 En que tú saltas como un moderno mono elastico. (18)

[The North is fierce and crude, boxer.  
 That same Broadway  
 Whose vein bleeds out  
 To screech beside the rings  
 Where you leap like a modern elastic monkey.]

Broadway bleeds into the ring; it is only another place where he must perform for the diversion of a screeching audience. The Broadway that bankrolls the boxer’s “fashionable patent-leather shoes” (Kid Chocolate was famous for high living) also “estira su hocico con una norme lengua húmeda/para lamer glotonamente/toda la sangre de nuestro cañaveral” (18) [“stretches its snout with a moist enormous tongue/to gluttonously lick/all our cane fields’ blood”]. The blood of the cane field rises and bleeds out in the Broadway boxing ring where Kid Chocolate takes beatings and gives them out, but this is a relationship that the boxer cannot see.

The poem not only critiques American economic exploitation in Cuba and laments the lonely fate of a Cuban migrant in the United States but expresses a deep skepticism about the cultural enterprise of black internationalism itself (in which sports, for Urrutia, Hughes, and many others, was a more important part than is perhaps realized). Guillén and Urrutia both feared a creative and athletic revival without structural change, a criticism Guillén launches here squarely against New York. However, the history of this poem’s publication and of its subsequent English translation has tended to obscure Guillén’s skepticism about the relationship between Harlem and Havana. Some of the criticism, especially in English, has even reframed his critical position as one of unrestrained exuberance. The original version of this poem contained a stanza that took a jab at Waldo Frank, the left-wing editor and essayist who lectured often in Cuba, and Langston Hughes:

De seguro a ti  
 no te preocupa Waldo Frank  
 ni Langston Hughes  
 (el de “I, too sing America.”)<sup>23</sup>

[No doubt you  
 Are not worrying about Waldo Frank  
 Nor about Langston Hughes  
 (He of “I, too sing America.”)]

This stanza extends Guillén’s critique of North American society’s exploitation of Kid Chocolate to two of its most famous radical intellectuals. These lines are, on the one hand, a reflection on the boxer’s own ignorance, and on the other an ambivalent critique of perhaps the two most famous living American writers in Cuba, who apparently have nothing to say to the likes of Sardiñas. Not even Hughes, whose signature poem, the oft-translated “I, Too, Sing America” proclaimed the speaker’s “beauty” to a racist nation that disdained it, can address the situation faced by a black Cuban in the United States and by extension Afro-Cubans in an American-dominated hemisphere.<sup>24</sup> Guillén removed this critical stanza, however, from a revised version published in his book *Sóngoro consongo* in 1931, perhaps as a concession to a poet with whom he had since become friends (and who was working to find an American publisher for the translation of *Motivos de son*).

Even without these critical lines, the revised and now authoritative version of “Pequeña oda” still raises the issue of white exoticism in the “vogue” for black arts and athletics in Harlem and Havana, but like the earlier critique of Hughes and Frank, this point has eluded readers of the poem’s English translation. The poem’s original ending derides a European fashion for consuming and even assuming the image of blackness. Guillén would repeat its final exclamation in his report on Hughes’s arrival in Havana two years later. The poem reads:

Y ahora que Europa se desnuda  
 para tostar su carne al sol  
 y busca en Harlem y en la Habana  
 jazz y *son*,  
 lucirse negro mientras aplaude el bulevar,  
 y, frente a la envidia de los blancos,  
 hablar en negro de verdad! (18)

[And now that Europe disrobes  
 to toast its flesh in the sun  
 and seeks in Harlem and Havana  
 jazz and *son*,  
 to play black while the boulevard applauds  
 and, before the envy of the whites,  
 to talk black for real!]

This stanza has been misunderstood by English-speaking critics who misplace the subject of Guillén's infinitive *lucirse*. The Spanish verb means "to show off" or "to impress," and has been badly mistranslated by Guillén's principal English editors and translators.<sup>25</sup> Robert Márquez and David Arthur McMurray rewrite this stanza as a triumphant declaration of black internationalism, eliminating Guillén's criticism of white ventriloquism of black identities. Their translation reads:

So now that Europe strips itself  
 To brown its hide beneath the sun  
 And seeks in Harlem and Havana  
*jazz* and *son*  
 the Negro reigns while boulevards applaud!  
 Let the envy of the whites  
 Know proud, authentic black!<sup>26</sup>

Although Guillén creates some ambiguity by separating the infinitive *lucirse* from its modal verb *busca*, Márquez and McMurray mistakenly assign the agency of the verb to *negro*, where it definitely does not belong because the subject of *busca* is Europe. This new ending completely changes the poem's meaning, replacing Guillén's comic, ironic critique of Euro-American consumption of black performance with a rather humorless declaration—with exclamation points—of black nationalist triumph across borders. Notably, this translation appeared in 1972, at the height of left-wing interest in Cuba as a leader of the Third World, when Guillén was the "national poet" of revolutionary Cuba.<sup>27</sup> What started in the original Spanish as a tribute to the boxer's beauty and strength concludes in this English translation with the self-involved gaze of European spectators. Guillén, notably, keeps English words like "jazz" and "jab" in roman type but puts the Cuban music term *son* in italics, as if it is a foreign term (a minor but important detail elided in McMurray and Márquez's transcription of the Spanish original, which does the opposite—it puts the English words in italics and sets "son" in roman type). The "toasted" spectators call jazz their own, but the *son* will always be someone else's foreign term, even in a Cuban poem about one of the country's proudest cultural exports.

The poem's final exclamation assembles this criticism of white exoticism into a sarcastic mockery of "authenticity," which Guillén quotes in the final line of his interview with Hughes—both the denizens of the boulevard and Hughes himself want to be, or at least to speak, "negro de verdad!" Whether

Guillén was intentionally alluding to the poem in his 1930 Hughes profile is impossible to determine. But the echo raises the question once again of the Cuban's distrust of his American guest. Is Hughes, in consuming the *son* of Havana to reaffirm his own connection to black Cuba, simply behaving like the European tourists of the "boulevard" who search for jazz and authenticity on upper Broadway? While Guillén removed the sharpest edge of his critique of American intellectuals in 1931, this poem's ending still cuts at the foreign exploitation of black Cuban culture—whether in the form of the career of Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo, as the poem emphatically claims, or the patronage of the *son* in Havana.

Nicolás Guillén, *Afrocubanismo*, and the Politics of the Cuban  
Avant-Garde

Rosalie Schwarz argues that activists and writers in Harlem and Havana formed two axes of a new black internationalism between the wars: "Of all the facets of life in the United States that fascinated Afro-Cubans in the 1920s," Schwarz writes, "Harlem cast the most captivating spell. Geographic proximity, long-standing ties between the United States and Cuba, and commitment to social betterment made kindred spirits of activists and writers in the two black communities."<sup>28</sup> As we shall see, however, this common assessment of seamless allegiance overstates *afrocubanista* writers' enchantment with the United States. In fact, for Guillén, "Harlem" was a metonym for segregation more than for cultural activism.

In order to understand the intellectual and political environment in which Hughes traveled in 1930 and 1931, we must first investigate the anti-imperialist avant-garde of which Guillén, and *afrocubanismo* in general, formed a crucial, if frequently marginalized, part. "Ideales de una raza" was part of a politically active, cultural nationalist intellectual movement in 1920s and 1930s Cuba that has been loosely referred to as *vanguardismo*, or avant-gardism. *Vanguardismo*, associated with journals like the *Revista de avance*, *Social*, and *Revista de la Habana*, took up the reevaluation of *cubanía*, or "Cubanness," during a period of intense political and economic crisis on the island. In Cuba between 1923 and 1933, economic crisis and the rule of an authoritarian nationalist leader, General Gerardo Machado, provoked a serious crisis in the political order that had governed Cuba since the end of the U.S. military occupation in 1902. The increasing power of U.S. capital



and its culture industries compounded this crisis for the intellectuals of the Cuban avant-garde. They aimed, in short, to “revindicate” the compromised republic and uplift its masses. In its manifesto, the avant-garde Grupo minorista (the Minoritarian Group) denounced “yankee imperialism” and Cuba’s “pseudodemocracy” while demanding the promotion of “the latest scientific and artistic theories” as well as a new “vernacular” art in Cuba.<sup>29</sup> The document synthesizes the main planks of the avant-garde in Cuba: the “renovation” of national values as part of a political-cultural project of liberal nationalism; the improvement and modernization of the cultural level of the masses via a didactic mission on the part of native intellectuals; and finally, the turn to popular culture as the vehicle for anti-imperialist cultural politics.

*Afrocubanismo* emerged as part of this renewed interest in the vernacular roots of Cuban national culture, from music and anthropology to poetry. Like the *vanguardia* itself, *afrocubanismo* was a loosely organized movement that represented an uneasy truce of divergent political positions, from Marxism and liberalism to a Latin Americanist mysticism, but in the mainstream of the movement, blackness was inseparable from Cubanness.<sup>30</sup> Some criticized *afrocubanismo* as anti-national—why divide the nation with “Afro-Cuban” poetry, asked the white scholar Alberto Arredondo, when all Cuban poetry is already Afro-Cuban? “The negro’s cause,” he wrote, “is the cause of nationality.”<sup>31</sup> Other white avant-gardists approached Afro-Cuban culture with the same exoticism that Guillén critiques in “Pequeña oda”—Fernando Ortíz, the famed cultural anthropologist, for example, began his career as a criminologist researching black *brujería*, or “witchcraft.” However, other white students of Afro-Cuban culture, like Ortíz’s colleague Lydia Cabrera, were motivated by the controversial thesis that Cuban culture was inextricably African.<sup>32</sup> Afro-Cuban nationalism surged in the 1920s and 1930s as part of a movement united around the goal of renewal, independence, and national culture. Therefore, while Guillén’s interest in vernacular song intersects with Hughes’s own, his explorations of the *son* were part and parcel of the Cuban avant-garde’s fascination with popular culture.

Guillén would eventually come to be the most famous literary figure associated with *afrocubanismo*, largely on the strength of *Motivos de son* and later works like *Sóngoro cosongo*, which also elaborated on African-derived musical and religious motifs. In his 1931 preface to *Sóngoro cosongo*, Guillén made the definitive statement of the movement’s mainstream goals: “Por lo pronto, el espíritu de Cuba es mestizo. Y del espíritu hacia la piel nos vendrá el color definitivo. Algún día se dirá: ‘color cubano’” [“For the time being, Cuba’s spirit is *mestizo*. And it is from the spirit,

not the skin, that we will derive our true color. Some day we will call it: ‘Cuban color’”].<sup>33</sup> Guillén’s aspiration—it is not *yet* called “Cuban color”—complements his fear that it may never be, that a spirit that is *mestizo* “for now” may dissipate into prejudice and dissension. Here, the specter of Jim Crow and northern ghettoization loomed large in Guillén’s mind, as they did for Urrutia and other Cubans of color who observed the United States. In his “Ideales” article “El Camino a Harlem” [“The Road to Harlem”], Guillén argued that Cuba was descending into an American-style racial divide, and he appealed to the heroes of the 1898 Cuban revolution, with its ideal of racial union, to prevent the disaster. “Harlem” here is not the cultural capital of a renaissance but simply a metonym of American segregation.

Insensiblemente, nos vamos separando de muchos sectores donde debiéramos estar unidos; y a medida que el tiempo transcurra, esa división será ya tan profunda que no habrá campo para el abrazo final. Ése será el día en que cada población cubana—a todo se llega—tenga su “barrio negro,” como en nuestros vecinos del Norte. Y ése es el camino que todos, tanto los que son del color de Martí como los que tenemos la misma piel que Maceo, debemos evitar.

Ése, es el camino de Harlem.<sup>34</sup>

[Senselessly, we are moving apart in many areas where we ought to be united; and as time passes, this division will become so deep that there will be no space for a final embrace. That will be the day when every Cuban community—[the day] reaches them all—has its “black barrio,” like in our neighbors to the North. And that is the road that everyone, those who are the color of Martí as much as those of us who have the same skin as Maceo, should avoid.

That is the road to Harlem.]

Guillén’s invocation of Martí, the white revolutionary thinker, and Maceo, the mulatto general of the independence wars, as the paired icons of the Cuban nation is a succinct expression of the ideal of racial democracy that *afrocubanista* intellectuals of color like Guillén and Urrutia defended. The road to Harlem, then, is not a path to modernity and militancy but in fact the way backward, the denial of the unique progressive potential that Cuba holds in the world.<sup>35</sup>

Hughes early on saw African American identity and American nationality as conflicting poles, and saw the former as constantly having to fight its exclusion from the latter. In his classic essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes framed the situation of the black artist in America as a battle against a particularly racialized form of cultural standardization. He wrote of “the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”<sup>36</sup> His travels in Cuba appear to have offered him further support for this thesis, as he enthusiastically assessed the opportunities available to Cuban artists and writers of color compared to those of black artists in the United States. In an article for *Crisis* on the black Cuban sculptor Ramos Blanco, Hughes praises his public monument to “heroic black motherhood,” a statue of the Afro-Cuban revolutionary heroine Mariana Grajales set to be unveiled in a prominent park in Havana. The fact that the Cuban government is publicly honoring a black woman as a national hero—in a sculpture by a black artist—leads Hughes to reflect on how few monuments there are in the United States recognizing Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and other African American heroes. Hughes concludes with a bitter challenge to his peers: “Is it that we have no artists—or no pride?”<sup>37</sup> The Martían ideal of a raceless nation provided the rhetorical space, at the very least, for Afro-Cuban writers such as Urrutia and Guillén to speak for both a racial and national community simultaneously. For Hughes, the apparent vibrancy of the Afro-Cuban avant-garde, and the fact that an artist like Ramos Blanco has received a government contract to honor a black national heroine in a public square, excites his own sense of the United States’ comparative injustice. The Afro-Cuban movement and the black contribution to Cuban history seemed to be honored by the national establishment. By contrast, if the Harlem Renaissance aspired to truly Americanize culture in the United States, as Alain Locke argued in his introduction to *The New Negro*, Hughes seems to suggest that the nation was not up to the task.

### *Cuban Responses to Langston Hughes*

Hughes’s sojourns in Cuba, and the intersections between other Cuban and American modernist intellectuals, illustrate the convergences and divergences between Cuban and African American modernism in the twenties and

thirties: rather than a unified intellectual or political project, these Cuban and American encounters reflected the same poles of intimacy and conflict that had characterized American representations of Cuba since the mid-nineteenth century. 1931, the year of Hughes's final visit to the island, was also the last year of "Ideales de una raza's" existence. The pioneering publication fell victim to the dictatorship of General Gerardo Machado, who consolidated his power and eliminated potential enemies, as Cuba's economy worsened and militant opposition increased. Cubans of color—both supporters and opponents of the regime—were swept up in this conflict in particular ways. As "Ideales de una raza" was censored, Afro-Cuban *santería* religion and even the congo drum were banned from public places on the grounds that they were "antinational" subversive practices.<sup>38</sup> The overthrow of Machado in 1933 by a combined student-military revolt gave rise both to a new militancy on race issues by Afro-Cuban groups and the Communist Party and a racist reaction that took the form of bombings, race riots in Cuban cities, and the mobilization of new organizations like the Ku Klux Klan Kubano. Without entirely abandoning *afrocubanismo's* appeal to Cuban mestizo nationalism, a new group called the *Asociación Adelante* (the Forward Association) drew on the wave of revolutionary nationalism of 1933 and the disillusion that accompanied the successful rightist reaction against it. In the contemporary climate of intense politicization, its monthly magazine *Adelante* succeeded "Ideales" as Cuba's new leading publication on racial issues.

*Adelante* published a wide variety of cultural, political, and historical essays; it strove to maintain a broad ideological heterogeneity and at the same time voiced a deep skepticism about Cuba's foundational promises of racial equality. The magazine also studiously covered international black arts and news on a wide variety of subjects, and it added an unprecedented regular section on *femenismo*. The paper included translations of poetry from the English-speaking world, including of Hughes's work, as well as commentaries on American culture and sports. In one issue, a Puerto Rican author, Angel Augier, translated American blues lyrics and accompanied them with a Marxist critical essay that read them as southern proletarian poetry.<sup>39</sup> The publication also featured a monthly profile of African American leaders and history: Arturo González Dorticós's biographical sketches chronicled "Federico Douglass," W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and others. In the pages of *Adelante*, as in "Ideales de una raza," the Afro-Cuban revival was always understood as part of an international movement that circulated in the United States and elsewhere. Yet this desire to consider Afro-Cuban culture as part of an international movement regularly came into conflict with *Adelante's* radical nationalism and many critics' resentment of the relative

ease and prestige with which African American culture seemed to circulate abroad. While *Adelante* paid keen attention to African American culture and history, several authors in *Adelante* sought to distinguish *afrocubanismo* from what Regino E. Boti, borrowing Frank Lloyd Wright's term for U.S. culture, called its "*usona*" cousin. For his part, Guillén appeared vexed by an early Cuban review that compared *Motivos de son* with Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, which as we have seen has since become a commonplace in Hughes and Guillén criticism. Shortly after *Motivos*' publication and three months after Hughes's second visit to Cuba, Guillén defended his poems' originality and vanguardist credentials. He asserted that his use of vernacular musical form, working-class slang, and impolitic racial language constituted a significant literary and political intervention, and not just in Cuba. "Desde el punto de vista literario," wrote Guillén in a testy response to a reviewer objecting to *Motivos*' vulgarity, "y por la significación que en el mundo tiene hoy lo popular, constituyen un modo de estar en la 'avanzada,' como quiere el gran periodista cubana" ["From the literary point of view, and in terms of the meaning that popular culture has in the world today, they constitute a mode of being in the 'advance guard,' just like the great Cuban journalist wants"].<sup>40</sup> Guillén asserted that the *Motivos* were not inspired simply by Hughes's blues poetry; rather, they were part of a world-wide turn toward *lo popular*. His response to the journalist links the poetics of the *son* to a global enterprise: vernacular language, not imitative cosmopolitanism or vulgar nationalism, says Guillén, is the revolutionary stuff of the true "modern" poetry.

In addition, some of Guillén's defenders also attacked the presumed lineage with Langston Hughes that had already begun circulating and spoke up for their poet's originality with nationalist ardor. An article by Batasar Oromundo in the May 1936 issue of *Adelante*, "La poesía afrocubana de Nicolás Guillén," celebrates Guillén's "modernity" and his "orgiastic" exploration of the "spiritual jungle of the negro theme" in describing the poet as both a "primitive" and a modernist. The article exoticizes Guillén's poetry in order to distinguish him from a comparatively dour, defeatist Americanism and thereby place him in the vanguard of hemispheric black literature. Referring to the poet by his first name, the article angrily distinguishes Guillén's modernity from his supposed "precursors"—which is to say, all African American poetry from its origins to the New Negro present.

Está distante el tiempo abuelo de Paul Lawrence [sic] Dunbar; y más lejos está la época de Phyllis Wheatley, el de Richard Bruce, Waring Cuney, Edwards Silvers [sic], Countee Cullen, nombres del

precursionismo . . . esta poesía de Nicolás es de indelable modernidad, transparente de cabal y absoluta integridad mulata, en lo espiritual, en lo sexual, en lo rítmico, en lo humano. Nada mas distante que esta poesía grave, del ‘jazz’ y su sentido de desviación histórica.<sup>41</sup>

[Distant are the grandfatherly times of Paul Lawrence [sic] Dunbar; and further still is the era of Phyllis Wheatley, that of Richard Bruce, Waring Cuney, Edwards Silvers [sic], Countee Cullen, all precursors . . . this poetry of Nicolás’s is of indelible modernity, transparently honest and of absolute mulato integrity, in the sexual, rhythmic, and human sense. Nothing could be further from this serious poetry of “jazz” and its sense of historical deviation.]

Despite its bluster and overstatement, Oromundo’s article recalls Urrutia’s more reasoned profile of Hughes upon his arrival in Havana five years earlier. Urrutia had made a similar connection between “modernity” and virility when he praised Hughes’s confrontation of a racist steamship company in New York. That article also drew a contrast between poetic modernity and American black music. Oromundo sees jazz as dour, old fashioned, and defeatist in its embrace of “historical violation”; the more politic Urrutia likewise had alleged in his profile of Hughes that a less “modern” poet would have retreated to Harlem after the racist insult at the Ward Steamship Lines offices, to compose “some lamentable BLUES,” drawing a similar connection between the “blues” and resignation, between American folk expression and an imagined spirit of capitulation in African American politics. In his article, however, Oromundo takes particular pains to distinguish the Cuban poet from any American “precursors,” tying his virile modernity to his nationality and his particularly Cuban originality. This article indicates that a consensus around Hughes’s influence had already started to form, even at this early stage after *Motivos*’ publication.

In another attempt to distinguish *afrocubanismo* from African American modernism, Regino Boti, an *afrocubanista* literary critic, also defended Guillén’s originality in an article that echoed other critics’ suspicion of jazz and blues. He reads Guillén as a “national” poet in his use of a local popular musical form that transcends its racial, class, and formal particularity to achieve a truly national “resonance.”<sup>42</sup> Drawing on José Vasconcelos’s concept of the “cosmic race”—a theory of Latin America’s ascendant mestizo civilization and the declining fortunes of Euro-America—Boti describes Cuban culture as a vibrant transculturation of African and Spanish elements,

of which Guillén's poetry is a triumphant example.<sup>43</sup> He delivers a parting shot at critics who, in a misguided attempt to legitimize Guillén's bold experiments, partake in the "zeal to find a genealogy for us":

Siendo el tono de la poesía de Nicolás Guillén extraño en Cuba, hubo necesidad en los pesquisadores de acudir al extranjero para propinarle un ancestro. Y lo hallaron en Langston Hughes. . . . Hughes se parece a Guillén todo lo que un poeta lírico debe parecerse a otro; y se diferencia de él en todo lo que un poeta lírico debe diferenciarse de otro. . . . Los dos poetas difieren, y sus cantos. La musa de Hughes espera. La de Guillén reclama.<sup>44</sup>

[Since the tone of Nicolás Guillén's poetry seems foreign in Cuba, it became necessary for these detectives to look abroad to find him an ancestry. And they found it in Langston Hughes. . . . Hughes resembles Guillén as much as one lyric poet could resemble another; and he differs from him as much as one lyric poet must differ from another. . . . The two poets differ, and so do their songs. Hughes's muse waits. Guillén's demands.]

Hughes, once praised in "Ideales" for his exemplary "virility," has now been surpassed by his alleged protégé, whose rebellion contrasts with the American's complacency. Boti's disavowal of Hughes and his influence is, to be sure, chauvinistic in its claims for Guillén's superior, militant "muse"—it should be noted that Guillén himself never wrote of Hughes in such personal terms—even though it yields a convincing account of the two poets' aesthetic differences. Yet Boti voices a resentment that complements James Weldon Johnson's theory of African American poetry's frustrated "universality" in his preface to the *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Johnson observed that African American music—especially ragtime, his prime example—had won audiences across national and linguistic borders as "American music." Yet he argued that African American literary artists could not transcend the particularity of U.S. racial segregation to write and speak as "American" authors.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Boti points to a situation in which poets of color from Latin American countries like Cuba may achieve national prestige but are denied any global cultural "universality"; in order to be read and understood in the centers of world culture, they must take their subordinate place in a Euro-American genealogy. Boti argues that Guillén has become a truly "national" poet in Cuba, unlike Hughes in his country; however, in order

to achieve a poetic “universality” that transcends this national particularity, Guillén requires the prestige and sponsorship of a North American ancestor like Hughes.

The distinctions between the New Negro movement and the *afrocubanista* movement are, of course, as substantial as those between the two countries and their histories. In the 1920s and 1930s, both Hughes and Guillén sought to internationalize the “revival” in black arts in Harlem and Havana. At the same time, both *afrocubanismo* and the Harlem Renaissance fought to *nationalize* movements often stigmatized by critics in both countries as narrowly “racial” (or, for others, not “racial” enough). Yet as Hughes observed, Cuba’s national ideology of *mestizaje* and the relatively recent memory of nationalist revolutionary struggle gave *afrocubanistas* a degree of rhetorical space in which to advocate for the rights and achievements of Cubans of color and conferred institutional legitimacy on such advocacy. Certainly no leading American white newspaper, much less the conservative national paper of record, sponsored a black-interest section in its Sunday pages. As the Harlem Renaissance looked south to Havana, Cuba appeared in both new and old forms. Like many travelers before him, for example, Hughes was enchanted by the sights of Spanish forts on the Havana waterfront. However, what to earlier generations of American travelers to Havana simply represented the Oriental romance of “Moorish” Cuba reminds him of the modern buccaneers of finance capital. Some of his other Cuban poems, like “Soledad: A Cuban Portrait” (“The shadows/Of too many nights of love/Have fallen beneath your eyes”) recall the hackneyed observations of countless breathless tourists.<sup>46</sup> Yet for Hughes Cuba also offers the possibility of solidarity in resistance to racial and economic injustice. For Cuban intellectuals like Urrutia and Guillén, on the other hand, a deeply felt internationalism at times conflicted with a nationalist outlook that confronted the economic, political, and cultural power of the United States. This anti-imperialist strain in the *afrocubanista* avant-garde sometimes took chauvinistic forms, as in the criticism of blues and jazz as musics of capitulation. However, it also underscores that diasporic internationalism was never a unified system but always a contradictory, incoherent practice, marked by utopian hopes and frustration, fellowship and mistranslation, admiration and resentment: there was no transnationalism without empire, and no possibility of community without the struggle of building it.



## Notes

1. For an account of Hughes's career in Spanish translation, see Vera Kutzinski, "Yo también soy América: Langston Hughes Translated," *American Literary History* 18 (2006): 550-78.

2. Gustavo Urrutia, letter to Langston Hughes, 20 Apr. 1930, Langston Hughes Papers, box 158, fol. 2926 James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT (hereafter Hughes Papers).

3. Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1: 1902-1941: I, *Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 181. In his reading of Urrutia's letter, Rampersad presumes that when Urrutia writes "they are the exact equivalent of your 'blues,'" he is comparing Guillén's poems to Hughes's "Weary Blues" rather than to African Americans' lower-case "blues." This interpretation is exceedingly generous to Hughes, given the lower-case rendering of the word.

4. Martha Cobb, *Haiti, Harlem, and Havana: A Critical Study of Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and Nicolás Guillén* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1979); Richard Jackson, "The Shared Vision of Langston Hughes and Black Hispanic Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* 15.3 (1981): 89-92; Ian Smart, *Nicolás Guillén, Popular Poet of the Caribbean* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 33-34; Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993). Jackson writes: "Guillén met Hughes in the early 1930s when the latter visited Cuba. Hughes led the Cuban poet away from the Hispanic Modernism of Ruben Dario to Afro-Hispanic blackness." This is a sweeping assertion—both of Hughes's leadership and of Guillén's *modernismo*—for which there is no evidence at all (89). Kutzinski's account of the genesis of *Motivos* is unclear on the question of influence: she claims, without evidence, that "Hughes . . . urged Guillén to use Afro-Cuban music as a basis for his poetry" but then notes correctly that "just how much of a specific impact Hughes and his blues poetry ultimately had on the writing of *Motivos* is difficult to ascertain." Kutzinski goes on to offer a succinct critique of the problematic analogy between American blues and Cuban *son* as black musical styles (151-52).

5. Smart, *Nicolás Guillén*, 33-34.

6. Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 64.

7. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

8. Kutzinski, "Yo también soy América," 567.

9. For detailed examination of the form, see Lise Waxer, "Of Mambo Kings and Songs of Love: Dance Music in Havana and New York from the 1930s to the 1950s," *Latin American Music Review/Revista de música latinoamericana* 15 (1994): 142-43. For an example of a patriotic *son*, see the Septeto nacional's 1927 classic "Esas no son cubanas" ["Those Are Not Cuban Women"].

10. Nicolás Guillén, "Yesterday Somebody Called Me Black," trans. Langston Hughes, and "Last Night Someone Called Me Darcy," trans. Ben Carruthers, Hughes Papers, box 424, fol. 9429; Nicolás Guillén, "Last Night Somebody Called Me Darcy," in *Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén*, trans. Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1948).

11. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 64.

12. Langston Hughes, "To the Little Fort of San Lazaro on the Ocean Front, Havana," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage, 1994), 136. "To the Little Fort of San Lazaro on the Ocean Front, Havana" from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* by Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, Associate Editor, copyright © 1994 by the Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

13. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1986), 6.

14. Langston Hughes, "The Trip to Havana," 1930, Hughes Papers, box 492, fol. 12436; "The official daily log book—Jersey to the West Indies—Lang & Zell—via Nazimova," 1931, Hughes Papers, box 492, fol. 12437. The authorship of this itinerary is rather ambiguous; the handwriting here appears to be Hughes's, but Rampersad attributes it to Zell Ingram, his traveling companion (201). We may assume, however, that the two diarists collaborated on such things.

15. Except, as he noted, in the case of Chinese "who do not meet certain requirements" ("El incidente Langston Hughes," *Diario de la Marina*, 23 Mar. 1930).

16. Gustavo Urrutia, *Armonías*, *Diario de la Marina*, 9 Mar., 1930.

17. Nicolás Guillén, "Conversación con Langston Hughes," *Diario de la Marina*, 2 Mar. 1930.

18. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 181; Keith Ellis, "Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes: Convergences and Divergences," in *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans Before the Cuban Revolution*, ed. Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 138.

19. Guillén, "Conversación con Langston Hughes."

20. Hughes's poem reads: "I am a Negro:/Black as the night is black,/Black like the depths of my Africa." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 24.

21. Guillén, "Conversación con Langston Hughes."

22. Nicolás Guillén, *Sóngoro cosongo: Poemas mulatos* (Havana: Úcar, García, y Cía, 1931), 18. Hereafter cited by page number.

23. For the 1929 version of "Pequeña oda," see Nicolás Guillén, *Obra poética*, vol. 1 (Havana: Editorial de Arte y Literatura, 1974), 101. For the 1931 version of the poem, with the relevant stanza removed, see *Sóngoro cosongo*, 18.

24. It is worth noting that Guillén, in quoting the poem's English title, leaves the accent off of the "e" in "America," while many of Hughes's Latin American translators rendered this word as "América." This accented América, which refers to the hemisphere, and particularly to Latin America, implies an inter-American meaning that the poem does not have in the original. Guillén retains the poem's original focus on the United States.

25. Translators like James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 56; Monika Kaup, "'Our America' That Is Not One: Transnational Black Atlantic Disclosures in Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes," *Discourse* 22.3 (2000): 101; and Ellis, "Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes," 139, who also notes Guillén's quotation of this poem's final line in his article "Conversación con Langston Hughes," have all misunderstood the poem's ironic ending in the same ways.

26. *Man-Making Words: Selected Poems of Nicolás Guillén*, ed. and trans. Robert Márquez and David Arthur McMurray (Northampton: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 54–55.

27. The volume is dedicated to Régis Debray, Frantz Fanon, and Angela Davis. Guillén was proclaimed *poeta nacional* in 1961, the same year he became president of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), the most important cultural institution in socialist Cuba.

28. Rosalie Schwartz, "Cuba's Roaring Twenties: Race Consciousness and the Column 'Ideales de una Raza,'" in *Between Race and Empire*, 109. Besides Ian Smart and Martha Cobb, see also *Man-Making Words*, 54–55, and Nancy Morejón, *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén* (Havana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1982).

29. "Declaración del Grupo minorista," *Carteles* 21 (1927), cited in [http://www.cubaliteraria.cu/monografia/grupo\\_minorista/declaracion.html](http://www.cubaliteraria.cu/monografia/grupo_minorista/declaracion.html) (accessed 5 Mar. 2008).

30. Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 177.

31. Alberto Arredondo, "El negro y la nacionalidad," *Adelante* (Mar. 1936): 144.

32. Lydia Cabrera, "La influencia africana en el pueblo de Cuba," in *Ensayo cubano del siglo XX*, ed. Rafael Hernández and Rafael Rojas (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 193–95.

33. Nicolás Guillén, "Prólogo," in *Sóngoro cosongo: Poemas mulatos* (Mexico, D.F.: Presencia Latinoamericana SA, 1931), 10.

34. Nicolás Guillén, "El camino a Harlem," *Diario de la Marina*, 21 Apr. 1929, in *Nicolás Guillén: Prosa de Prisa*, vol. 2 (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1975), 6.

35. Guillén's revision of Harlem's place in the Afro-Cubanist imagination and the American critics' mistranslation of "Pequeña oda" recall Pascale Casanova's observation that the "irremediable and violent discontinuity between the metropolitan literary world and its suburban outskirts is perceptible only to writers on the periphery, who, having to struggle in very tangible ways in order simply to find 'the gateway to the present' (as Octavio Paz put it), and then to gain admission to its central precincts, are more clear-sighted than others about the nature and the form of the literary balance of power." Despite the idealism of the book's central premise—the notion of a "world republic of letters" clashes with my own sense of the transnational as an often incoherent *practice*—Casanova's assertion of the unequal terms of literary and cultural exchange rings true (*The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004], 43).

36. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, 23 June 1926, 692.

37. Langston Hughes, "A Cuban Sculptor," *Opportunity* 8 (Nov. 1930): 334. Mariana Grajales was a heroine of revolutionary wars against Spain; the mother of José and Antonio Maceo, the mulatto generals of the first and third wars of independence, she also operated field hospitals.

38. Machado also selectively incorporated Afro-Cuban culture as a populist strategy. For example, he publicly patronized certain *son* groups and cultivated the support of elite Afro-Cuban cultural societies like the Club Aténas. See Ned Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 370.

39. Angel I. Augier, "Sobre las canciones de los negros norteamericanos," *Adelante* (June 1936): 12–14.

40. Nicolás Guillén, "Son y soneros," *Diario de la Marina*, 15 June 1930.

41. Baltasar Oromundo, "La poesía afrocubana de Nicolás Guillén," *Adelante* (May 1936): 24. Oromundo is apparently referring to the poet Edward Silvera.

42. Carpentier, in his well-known history of Cuban music, made a similar argument for the *son* genre. The *son*, he argued, brought Afro-Cuban percussive elements from the "slave barracks and the dilapidated rooming-houses of the slums" to a true "universal status." Yet Carpentier, in an interesting contrast to the nationalist criticism of Boti here, explains this achievement this way: "The *son* is to Cuban music what 'Christopher Columbus' by Benny Goodman or Ellington's 'Black and Tan' is to ragtime music in 1915." The *son* is a national art, and so, he insists, is U.S. ragtime (*Music in Cuba*, trans. Alan West-Durán [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001], 180).

43. José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

44. Regino Boti, "La poesía cubana de Nicolás Guillén," *Revista bimestre Cubana* 29 (May–June 1932): 352.

45. James Weldon Johnson, preface, *The Book of American Negro Poetry: Chosen and Edited with an Essay on the Negro's Creative Genius* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1922), vii. One of Johnson's examples is the Afro-Cuban abolitionist poet Plácido, executed by the Spanish in 1844 and elevated to heroic status in Cuban letters thereafter.

46. Langston Hughes, "Soledad: A Cuban Portrait," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 57.